VIDEOGAME CULTURE

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PREVIEWED

Street Fighter X Tekken
Dead Rising 2: Off The Record
Dragon's Dogma
Child Of Eden
Uncharted 3
Rage

DRIVER SAN FRANCISCO
The head-spinning return of the original wheelman

Tomb Raider

The story behind the rip-roaring rebirth of an icon

Plus: Lionhead's secret game labs TrackMania 2: Canyon Advance Wars Portal 2







In the dusty old days of 32bit gaming, the images used to promote Lara Croft consisted of flat colours, simple lines and often the hint of a girl-power grin. Such portrayals contrast starkly with the grubby, sweaty heroine featured on the cover of this issue – and the increase in rendering fidelity at the fingertips of the artists responsible is only a small part of the story. The most important message here, in fact, is that Lara Croft is no longer Lara Croft – or at least not the one who once appeared on Lucozade bottles.

Original series incumbent Core Design may have attempted to tell Lara's origin story with 1999's *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, but with this new iteration Crystal Dynamics is setting out to reset the record. For a series with a legacy stretching 15 years, starting afresh isn't a trifling task, but the new game's title – simply *Tomb Raider* – says everything about the determination that's powering the project. Having toed the line in updating the franchise in recent years with the likes of *Legend* and *Underworld*, Crystal Dynamics appears ready to modernise it. On p52 we talk to the team about what that really means.

Reinvention is a recurring theme throughout this issue. In Hype, we look at how Capcom's *Resident Evil* series is being retooled as a squad-based shooter in *Operation Raccoon City* (p34), Namco's *Tekken* characters are being reimagined in the context of *Street Fighter X Tekken* (p39), and the Star Wars universe is being reinterpreted in an MMOG format via *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (p46). We also talk to Reflections about how PlayStation-era hero Tanner has been reimagined through *Driver San Francisco* (p62), and visit *Trackmania* creator Nadeo to discover how its unique approach to user-generated content is being reinvigorated on a bolder scale (p74).

Just one more thing involving words beginning with 're': the next edition of **Edge** will be the first in its redesigned format. Look out for it from June 7.







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"I couldn't do that. Could you do that? Why can they do it? Who are those guys?"



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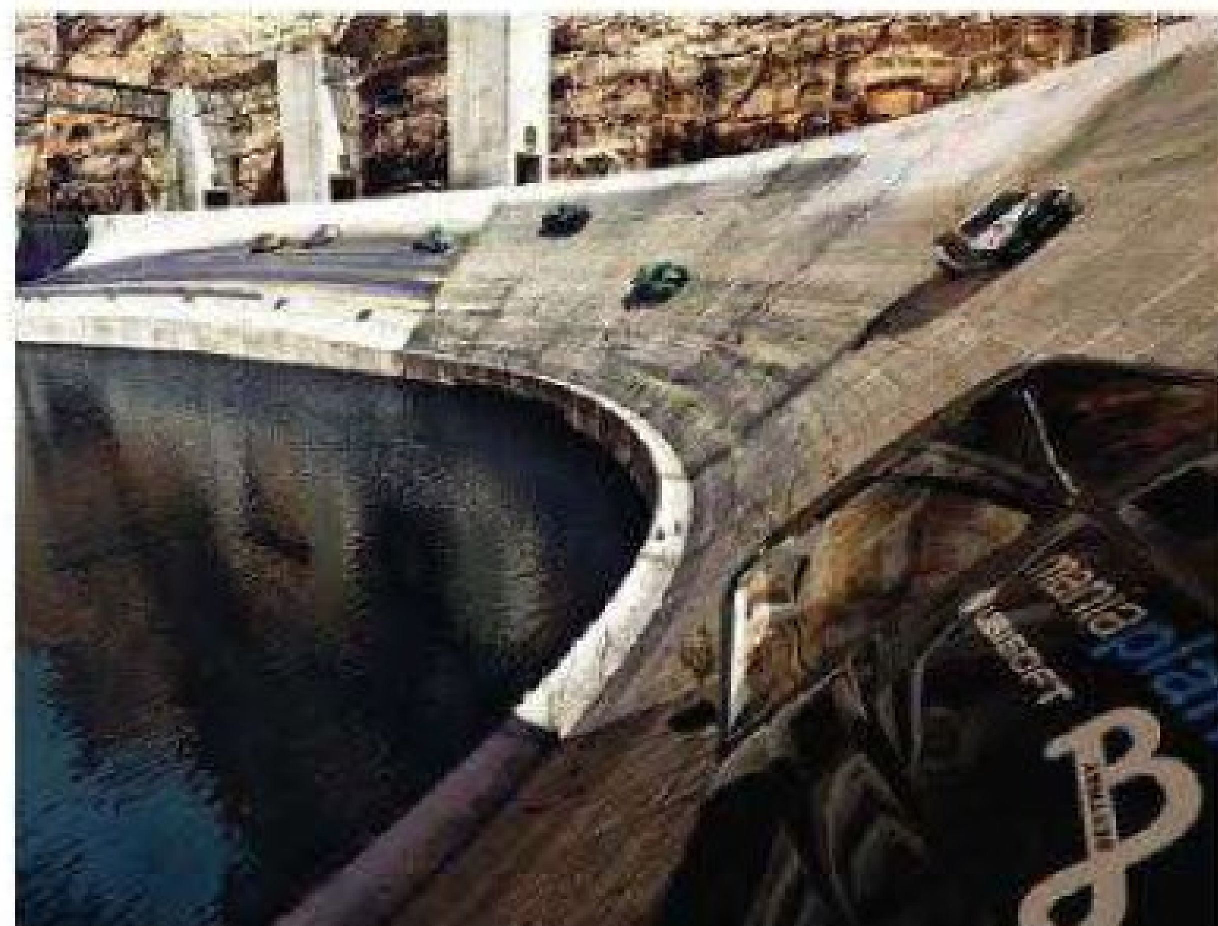
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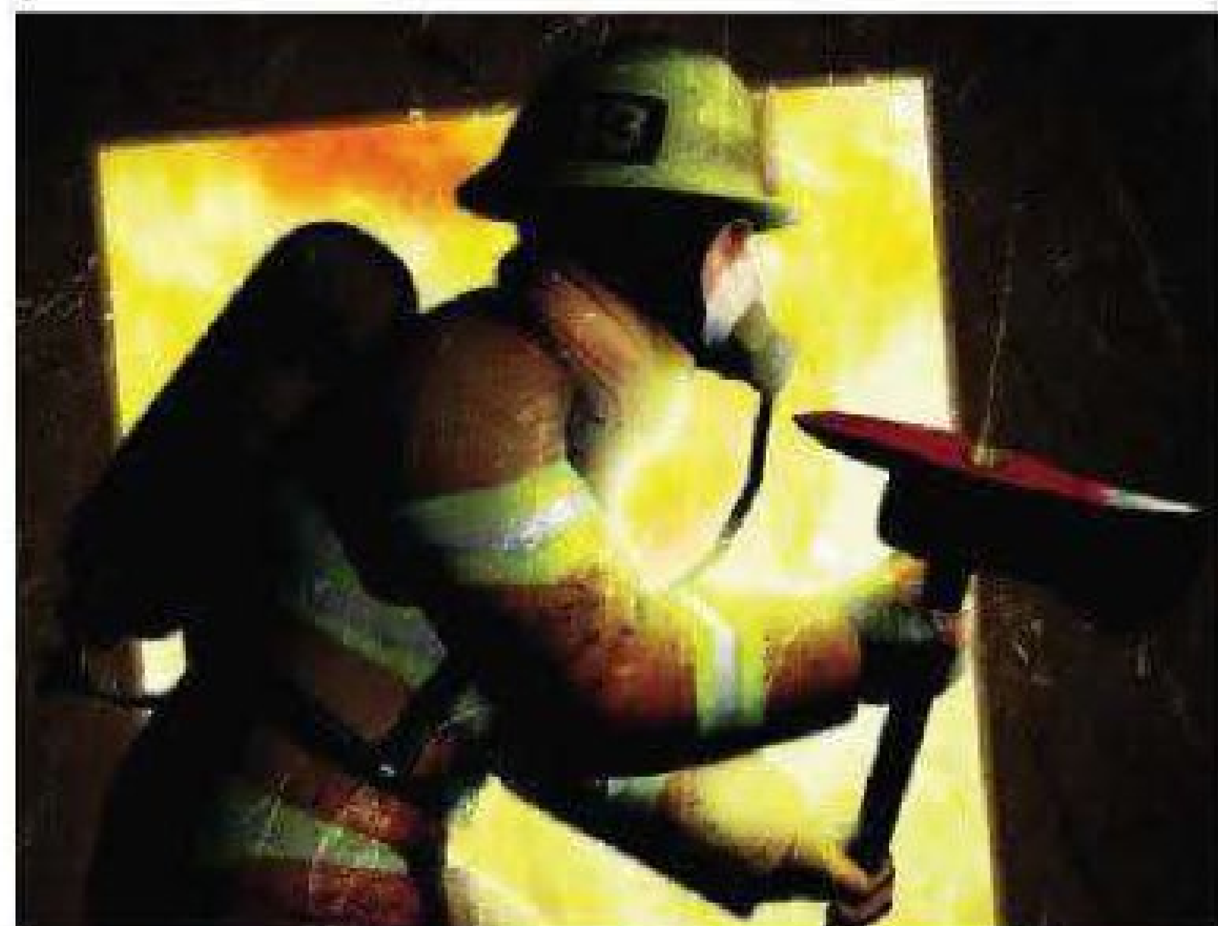
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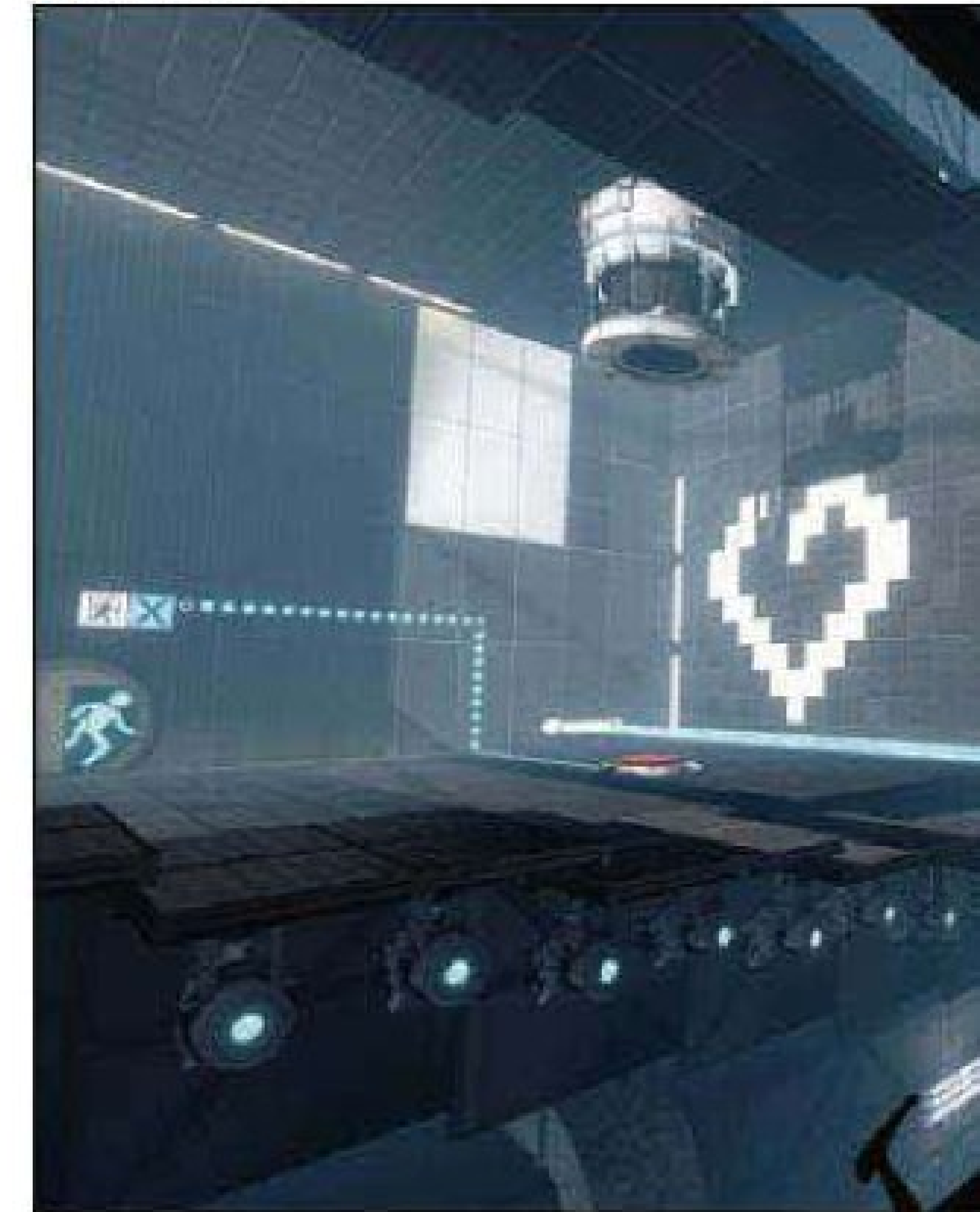
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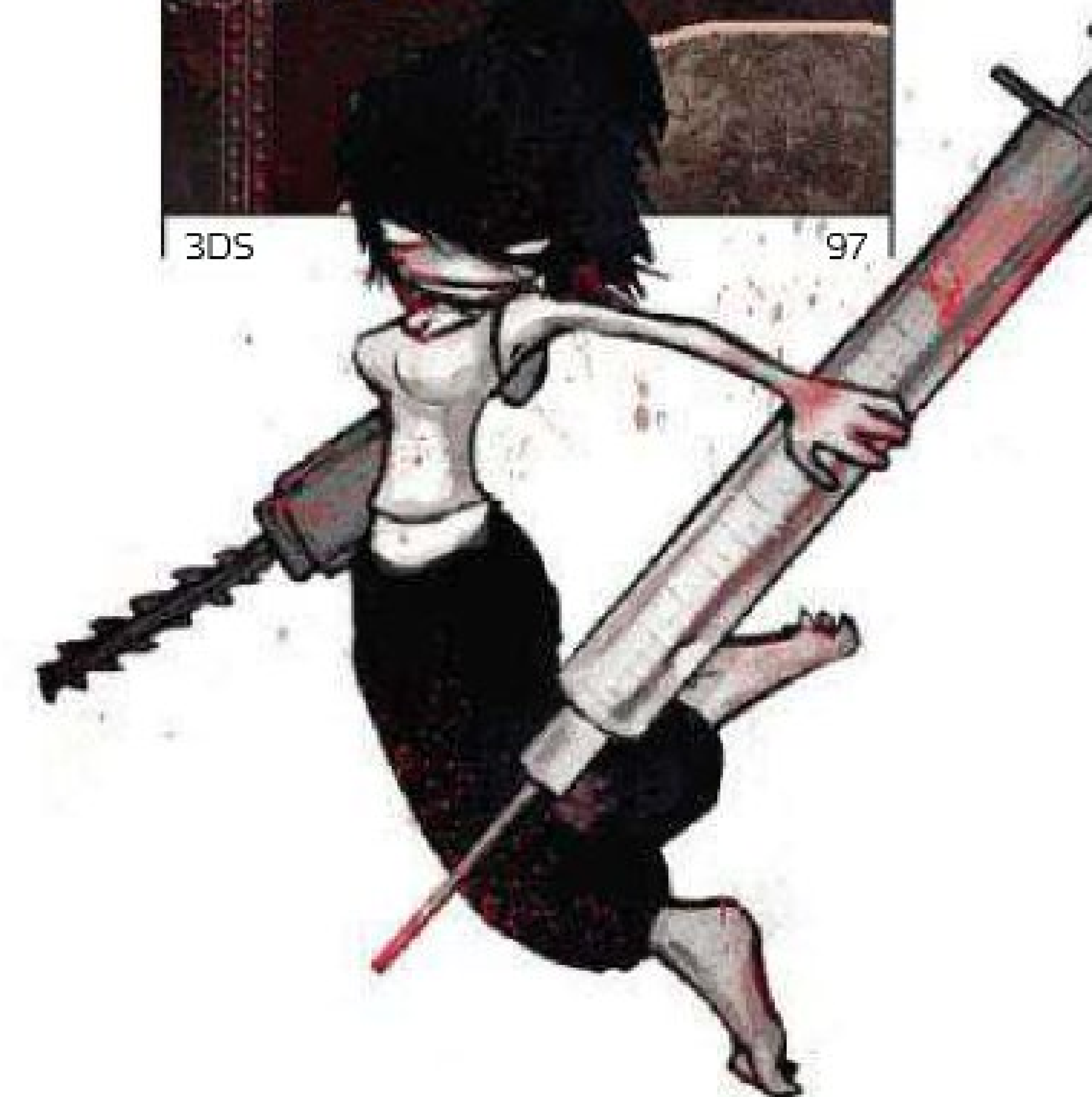


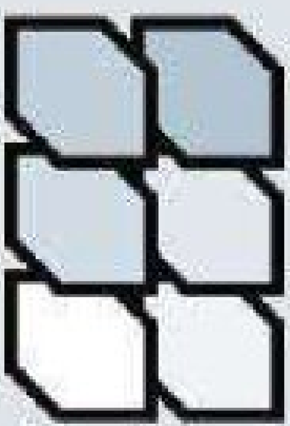
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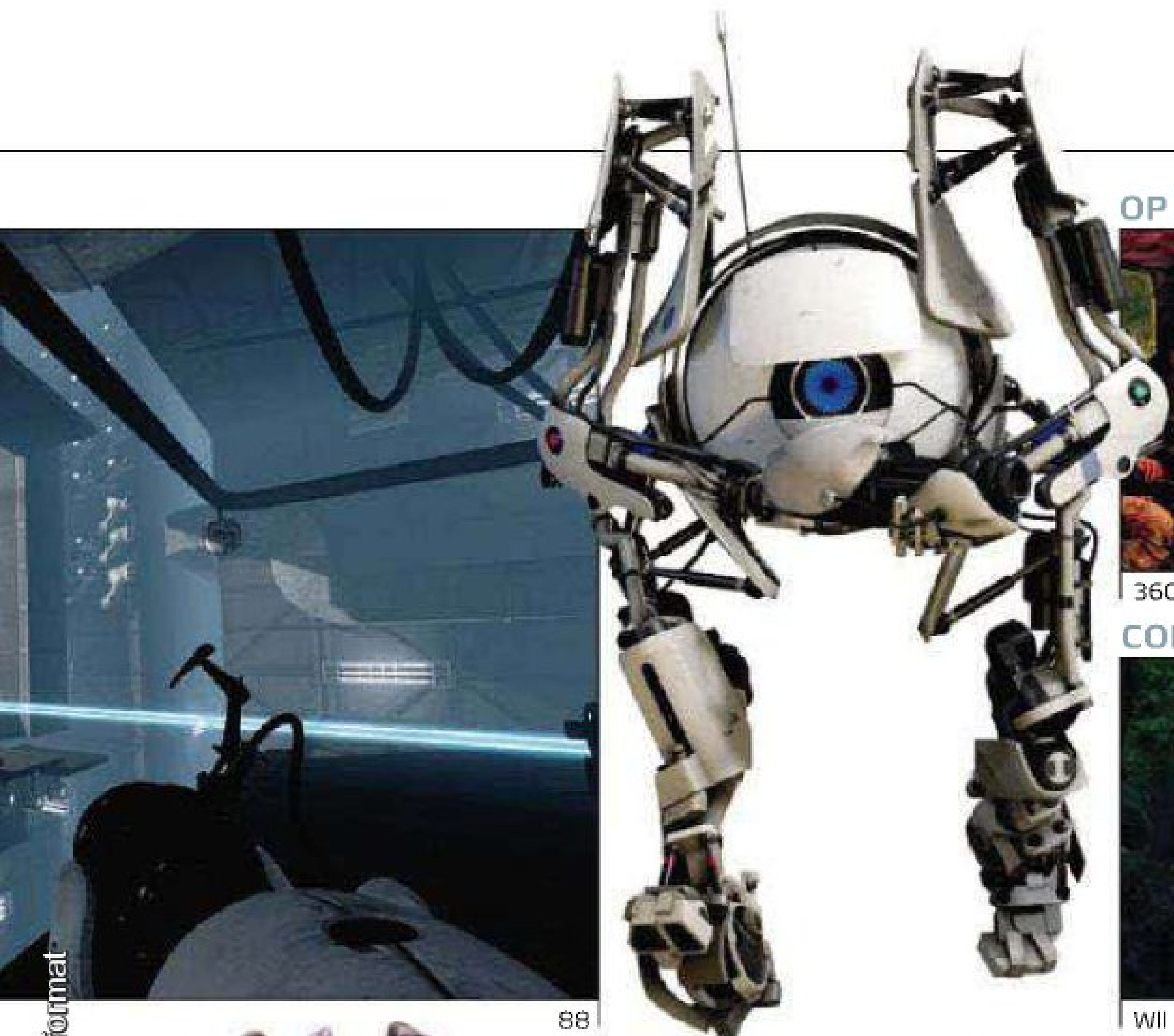
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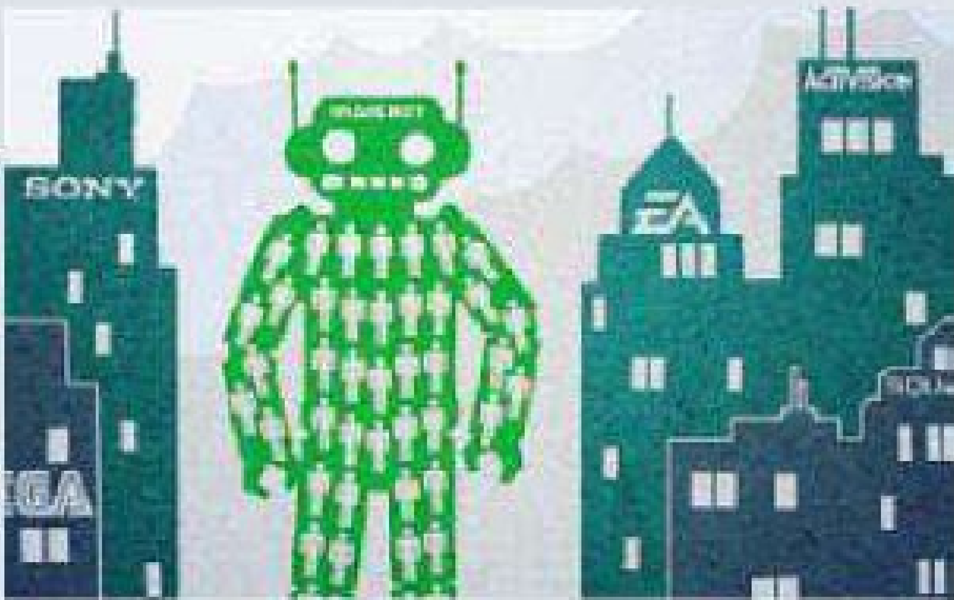
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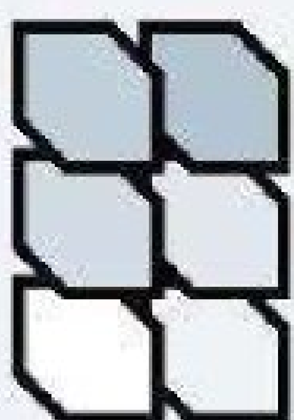


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DEVELOPMENT

Power to the people

As game devs ask fans to foot their bill up front, we take a look at the ins and outs of crowdfunding

Hey, can you give us $15 million? Impudent as the question sounds, it's precisely what Zero Point Software is asking of the general public. With said cash, sourced straight from the community's pockets, the developer hopes to fund *Interstellar Marines* – a firstperson shooter intended to rival the likes of *Halo* and *Killzone*. That may seem like quite a long shot, but the idea of crowdfunding has been around for years, and its successes in other industries are well documented, even for budgets extending into the millions.

The concept turns the traditional transaction on its head: customers put their cash up front, and then the game gets made. In order to attract potential donors, developers post an early version of the game, or even just a video or screenshots, explaining their aims and laying out the required budget. If people donate, they get a 'perk' – anything from a thank-you call to an in-game appearance; the more cash, the better the perk. It's common for beta access or at least frequent development updates to be part of the package.

It's only recently, however, that game developers have begun boarding this bandwagon in great numbers; as with any new business model that boasts a few high-profile successes, there's clearly a perception that crowdfunding is an easy way to get $5,000 for developing a side-scrolling Flash game.

Has the internet created a new form of social patronage: meritocratic, transparent and accessible? Or are the cynics right when they talk of online begging bowls for con men?

But what's really going on isn't nearly so clear. Has the internet created a new form of social patronage: meritocratic, transparent and accessible? Or are the cynics right when they talk of online begging bowls for con men and fantasists?

While crowdfunding websites such as Kickstarter have existed for some time, it was only this year that 8-bit Funding, the first gaming-dedicated crowdfunding website, was launched.

"I started a small blog for indie games in 2009," says founder **Geoff Gibson**. "Back then I would habitually send developers I was working with to Kickstarter to get extra money. Then in summer 2010 I stopped doing that because everyone I would send, their project would fail and I would feel bad – they were expecting something to happen, something better. And I realised that, as Kickstarter grew, the projects that were growing were music, movies and design projects – gaming projects still kind of languished. I started toying with the idea of a gaming-specific site back in October and threw something together as a proof of concept in December 2010."





Kim Jørgensen (left) is the director of crowdfunded FPS *Interstellar Marines* at Zero Point Software, while Geoff Gibson is the founder of crowdfunding website 8-Bit Funding

Budgets can range from a few hundred dollars into tens of millions, but by far the majority of crowdfunded games exist at the lower end of the scale.

"Right now it's probably the smaller projects that seem to work best – $5,000 and below," says Gibson. "We have *Cardinal Quest*, which is approaching $5,000, and they get a few hundred dollars every couple of days. There's one project in waiting that wanted to ask for $250,000 and I had to say: 'Look, we're not at that stage yet'. Unless you have someone who's going to come in on day one and drop $100,000 you're better off trying somewhere else."

Qualitatively speaking, the videogame projects soliciting money are a mixed bunch. Many bear retro stylings and fill out familiar genres. Others are plain batty. Among these are a scattering of gems, like *Grandroids* – the latest project from Steve Grand, creator of '90s artificial life program *Creatures* – which has raised over $40,000 on Kickstarter at the time of writing. But if crowdfunding attracts a lot of overambitious and unrealistic dross, the same is true of any business model; the frequency of '$0 Donated' banners on crowdfunding sites suggests that appealing to the masses finds no greater number of mugs ready to part with their money than in any other method of fundraising. Nonetheless, it is this direct dialogue with the public that is the core of crowdfunding,







In mid-March the makers of *Orion Prelude* (above) had a spat with an ex-employee over unpaid work, at the same time as it succeeded in raising just under $16,000 on Kickstarter. Sites like Reddit picked up the story, and Spiral Games Studio's reaction (or lack of it) meant the company came in for a communal roasting

and the reason it's an interesting option for games with an angle. You could crudely say it's all about popularity, but really it's about engagement.

"You absolutely can't leave your project alone, ever," says Gibson. "You cannot leave it alone and expect it to make money – this goes across our site, Indiegogo and Kickstarter. If you put it up and just think the money's going to roll in, that's not going to happen. The reason successful projects are successful is because their developers are talking to people, telling them what they're doing and asking people to check it out and maybe donate if they like it. They get people excited, and that's how things get funded."

That engagement is the distinction between donations and patronage. It leads to the thorniest issue around crowdfunding: who owns the game? On crowdfunding sites Indiegogo, Kickstarter and 8-Bit Funding, creators keep 100 per cent and aren't allowed to offer their project as an investment. Crowdfunding sites aren't security dealers, explains Gibson: the US Securities and Exchanges Commission has comprehensive guidelines about the disclosures required for investors to make an informed decision.

"It's not an investment in any way," says Gibson "We're not even allowed to call it an investment. So anybody who's expecting more than their perk, well, tough. When we first started we had a few people who tried to say: 'Invest $1,000 and you'll get ten per cent of the profits!' We had to step in and shut that down real quick."

While funding a niche *Rogue*-like may be its own reward, some projects need to offer investment in order to meet their massive budgets. Operating independently of dedicated crowdfunding websites and their legal constraints, Zero Point Software is able to offer ownership in *Interstellar Marines* in exchange for contributions towards its projected $10–$15 million budget. **Kim Jørgensen**, the game director of *Interstellar Marines*, explains how it works: "Right now we have an internal commitment from investors which we are obviously burning off, but since we started releasing videos we've been getting quite a lot of support and generating income. Now we're about 50 per cent funded by our community [month by month], and hopefully we'll get to the point in the next couple of months where we're wholly funded by crowdfunding."

The donation mechanism is 'Support Medals': buy more than 20 (spending $100 in the process) and you'll begin to get shares in return from the majority shareholder in developer Zero Point Software. "In Denmark they're called B-shares," says Jørgensen. "You get access to dividend payments, so once we get to the point where we create profit, the community stockholders will get full returns." In terms of games, this makes *Interstellar Marines* the exception rather than the rule – though larger crowdfunded projects in other media frequently offer 'ownership' to their funders.

Could crowdfunded projects really compete at the top level of the game industry? We could find out in the not-too-distant future: back in 2009, Valve's Gabe Newell spoke about "financing from the community" as a way of funding original projects, and it's quite

IDO YEHIELI main programmer, *Cardinal Quest*

Crowdfunding has facilitated a number of promising indie projects, not least of which is modest *Rogue*-like *Cardinal Quest*, which easily secured its $6,000 budget on 8-Bit Funding. We spoke to its main programmer, **Ido Yehieli** (pictured right), about the process.

Why did you decide to crowdfund the development of *Cardinal Quest*?
The current version online is from a competition called the '4 Days Roguelike Challenge'. We put it up, it suddenly got on Reddit and some other social link sites and my site got a lot of traffic, like 15,000 people within several hours. And lots of them left positive feedback and wanted more of it, and that's when I thought about working more on it. I didn't think about crowdfunding at all until the guy who founded 8-Bit Funding posted on, I think it was the TIGSource forums, that he had this new site and was looking for people who wanted to be part of it. Then I submitted the game.

The perks for donating to *CQ*'s development include creating in-game items and enemies – don't you think that takes the design out of your hands?
Well, I think until now I was getting a lot of feedback from players anyway – of course they can't just get to decide stuff without me agreeing; it has to be a conversation. But a lot of the features the game currently has come from good suggestions and ideas from players. Some of the ideas are not great, but some are really quite good.

The budget of *CQ* isn't huge – what will it pay for?
Well, I was committed to finishing it but now I'm getting money from people I'm much more committed in terms of time. I'm now doing it full-time. I'm a freelance game designer so a lot of my work is working for local game companies here in Vienna and for the next two months at least, probably longer, I'm going to be working on it full-time.

Players can't just get to decide stuff without me agreeing; it has to be a conversation. But a lot of the features the game currently has come from good suggestions and ideas from players

It lets me take a break from the freelance work, and I hope in May to finish a version to sell to Flash portals. Then I'll be doing an iPhone and PC version, hopefully funding those from the initial Flash game.







The projected size of *Interstellar Marines* (above), in the context of the size of the team working on it, seems ambitious. Its makers aren't oblivious to this, as the pitch video ends: 'Will you believe?'

conceivable that long-awaited sequels with the weight of, say, *Shenmue 3* might find crowdfunding a particularly fruitful prospect.

Even then, it's hard to see *Interstellar Marines*, or any videogame, as a traditional investment. Despite the availability of shares, the people paying for *Interstellar Marines* aren't buying Support Medals for a rainy day; they just really want to play the game – and, perhaps, experience a vicarious thrill at seeing something they championed achieve a degree of success.

"It varies from person to person," says **Andreas Christofides**, one of *Interstellar Marines*' funders, with 12 support medals and a $48.75 (£30.50) forum account to his name, bringing with it increased access to the dev team's efforts. "Some people want a stake in the company, but for me, I just want to see the game made. Although I do think Zero Point's vision [for crowdfunded development] is extremely important, the concept of the game itself and what they've put out so far has impressed me a lot."

The game still faces an uphill battle, Christofides concedes – underscoring the fact that his contributions are patronage more than an investment. "The game itself is solid, but it's a very competitive market, especially the FPS genre."

Plenty of questions still surround crowdfunding. What happens when a project isn't completed or it doesn't turn out the way its creator said it would? With Kickstarter, creators can face legal action from their backers if they don't fulfil the terms of their original pledge – but the extent of legal obligations is a nebulous issue not detailed in Kickstarter's FAQ at the time of writing; the company's representatives skirt around the question when we ask them what happens in such disputes.

"Of course art doesn't always turn out exactly as intended," says **Yancey Strickler**, Kickstarter co-founder, emphasising the rarity of such problems. "We strongly encourage creators to communicate often and openly on how their project is developing."

But if all the repercussions for donors and investors are yet to be understood, at least *Interstellar Marines*' developers know what they need to do to achieve their own ends – engaging fans constantly on forums, providing periodic insights into the design, creating a connection that makes a player want to invest. Direct-to-fan sales are the logical endpoint of a crowdfunded project, built around creative merchandising and professionally maintained social networks, and so this ongoing 'relationship' with fans is as important as the down payment: it's a proving ground, in a way, for the theory presented by the likes of *Minecraft*'s Markus 'Notch' Persson and Valve – that pirates aren't your enemy; they're potential customers you've so far failed to engage. And there may be few better ways to encourage pirates to hang up their hooks: crowdfunding offers a secret handshake between developer and player, the prospect of a shared journey towards a common goal.

"The reason projects are successful is their developers are talking to people, telling them what they're doing and asking people to check it out and maybe donate"





It's crowdfunding, stupid

A success story from a parallel industry

The film Age Of Stupid is one of the best-known crowdfunding projects to date, and something of a trailblazer: a co-production of Spanner Films and Passion Pictures, the movie has the late Pete Postlethwaite in a nightmare 2055 looking 'back' at contemporary footage and bemoaning humanity's idiocy. The £450,000 budget was raised by selling shares to over 200 smaller investors (the amount varying from £500 to £35,000) – who now own a percentage of the film and a share of the profits.

The project is easy to admire, not just as a piece of activism but as a smartly executed business model: crowdfunding raised the budget, but direct-to-fan sales and the concept of indie screenings (which allows anyone to host a screening of the movie and keep the profits) made it a huge success. The DVD special edition and its tangible goodies are clearly a labour of love – the sharpest touch of all being that, if you're from a poor country, the price you pay is subsidised by the rich countries that caused the problem.





The quality and type of project is wildly variable. It's surprising *Grandroids* by Steve Grand (left, with friend) hasn't been funded by a well-meaning institution, for example, but less so in the case of stalled Kickstarter project *Immortal StarMasters* (above), whose documentation seems to be a philosophical treatise on "why is life war?"

INTERVIEW

Venture time

Bing Gordon figures in many gaming success stories. We find out what he's betting on now



Gordon served as EA's chief creative officer for ten years, leaving in 2008 to join long-established venture capital company KPCB

Electronic Arts, Ngmoco, Amazon and Zynga – these are just a few of the juicy pies in which **Bing Gordon** has a finger. CCO of EA in its early days, he has since turned his attention to investment, while retaining board membership of a number of the industry's biggest players in the social gaming space. We ask him for tips on where the smart money lies.

How do venture capitalists view gaming?

When I got here [Silicon Valley-based venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers], venture capitalists thought that gaming was uninvestable; they say they don't like being involved in 'hit-driven businesses'. I said, "Well, Google's a hit. Facebook's a hit". I come at it from a different point of view: all good investments are going to have some disbelievers, and I do believe gaming is going to become increasingly ubiquitous.

So is gaming making inroads now?

Social games and mobile games are highly investable. For game makers it's pretty easy to raise money for social games and mobile games. The numbers would say it's just getting started. In social, Facebook is at 600 million monthly [unique visitors], and worldwide there's probably 1.2 billion monthly uniques in social experiences online. I think that number is going to triple across the next five years; I think the average number of friends is going to triple, and I think the average number of posts per session is going to triple. Multiply that together and you get a pretty big growth.

There are about 200 million smartphones out there now, and we'll probably be at a billion and a half in the next five years. There still need to be some changes in mobile app usage, but in mobile it seems easy to predict a growth of seven to ten times depending on some factors. You don't often get to see growth of that level within five years. I think it's going to be wild and woolly. Apple is doing well but there are a bunch of other mobile OS companies that don't quite have it together yet. If one more company starts to do great – if Google curates Android a little more, for example – there could be an explosion of second order growth.

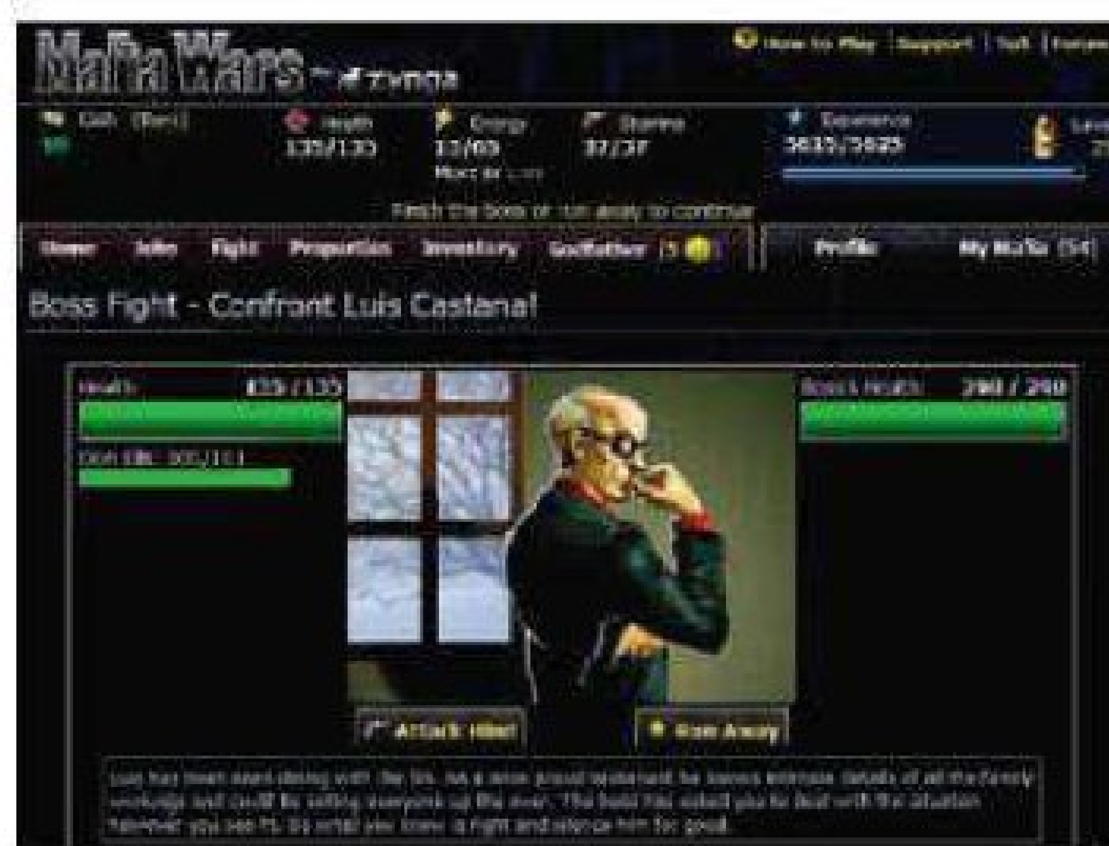
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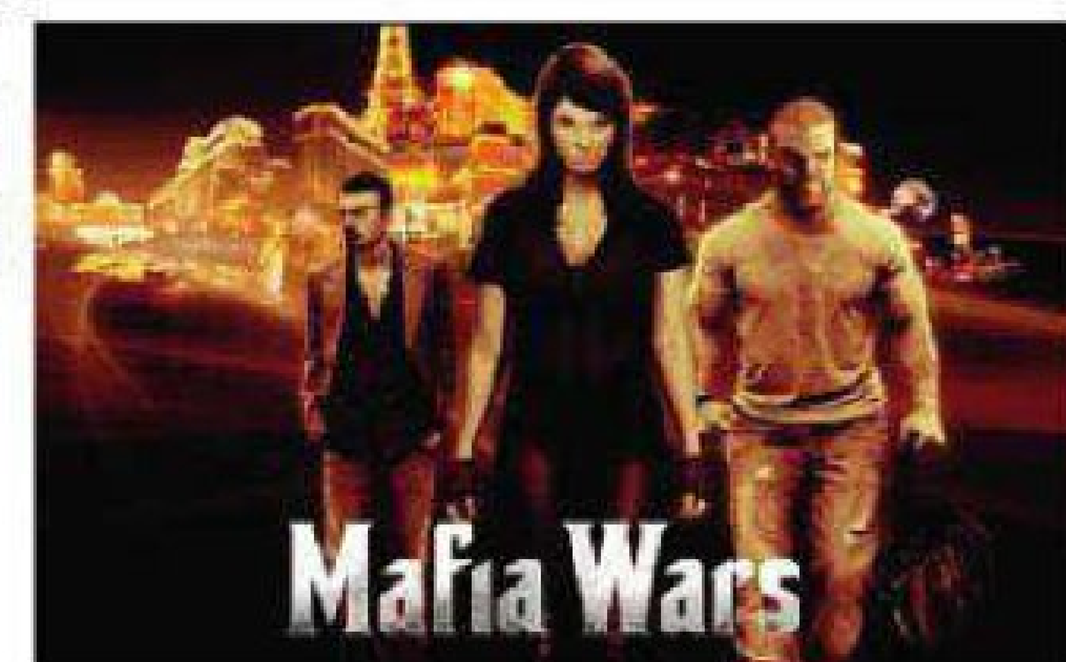
In the world now the economies are Brazil, Russia, India and China. Those populations are only, like, 15 per cent penetrated. In five years they're going to be 70 per cent to 90 per cent. Then there's east Africa. In Kenya, there is one cellphone for every two people in the country. People who earn $300 a year own cellphones and pay for content. I think we're going to see 90 per cent of adults in the world connected to the internet by some form of mobile device by the end of the decade. Right now the most exciting places are the ones where the economy is also taking off; new people becoming middle-class citizens wanting to pay money to get ahead. That's the engine of economic growth around the world!

"Most stores in the western world should be empty. They should be turned into community centres. You pay a lot to go to a store compared to going to Amazon"

Which games do you make time to play nowadays?

I only play games now that are social with persistent assets. *World Of Warcraft*, *FarmVille*, *CityVille*, *Mafia Wars* and Pogo [EA's casual games portal]. Games as adrenaline rushes – well, I'm busy; I'd rather play sports, and I've never played gun games – it's one of the only categories I've never liked. I'm always astonished to see what games look like these days, but I feel like I'm an outsider when I look at those great visuals. It surprises me, because in the early days of gaming I





"I'm playing *Mafia Wars* because I like levelling," says Gordon of one of the other social games that has driven his understanding of the market. "I play it for the solo experience, but I come back to it for the friends who need help for their own experience"

OUT THERE



SOUL FOOD

Ignition, developer of upcoming action game *El Shaddai* (see E226), recently promoted the game with a themed café in Nakameguro, Tokyo, complete with an *El Shaddai*-related menu. Having downed your heavenly cappuccino and cleaned your plate of its angelic delights, there was, of course, the chance to pop over to play an *El Shaddai* demo or pick up some merchandise. Proceeds from product sales are to be donated to charity as part of Ignition's El Shaddai For Japan campaign, which will also see part of the game's first-year sales go towards helping with the country's earthquake relief effort.



"Games are more important than the game business realises," Gordon maintains. "We have a generation growing up where games [such as *WOW*, below] and the internet are more relevant than school, and game mechanics are behaviour multipliers. Employers and schools will have to become more like games"



Gordon's interest lies in the low-cost social gaming space dominated by the likes of Zynga, whose games include *Vampire Wars* and *FrontierVille* (below): "I think 'packaged goods' games, the several-gigabyte install games, are going to become increasingly like blockbuster movies. We love them when they work, but they're economically risky"



thought that those visuals were going to be the primary emotional connection for players. It turns out that for me the primary emotional connection is what happens with friends thanks to the game. Games as blockbuster movies I find interesting but not personally compelling.

But that's still the context of major game companies like Activision and EA.

That's where the money and excitement is, the major works of art: it's Star Wars and The Godfather. Big budgets, huge excitement, massive cultural relevance, but you're risking a lot of money. The alternative is the 'Googleification' of games: always-in-beta games that you try to engage people with and keep them for a long time. In the packaged goods business there is no intention to hold people for a long time; I grew up in Detroit in the '60s and they purposely planned obsolescence because they wanted you to buy a new car every three years.

Which is partly what destroyed the auto industry in the region, isn't it?

Planning obsolescence gets you out of touch with your consumer, because you're trying to sell them something they don't want. With games as a service, you want people to keep their car for life.

Is EA putting enough money into the social space to do that?

EA has spectacular talent and spectacular IP, and so EA should be able to persist as a great company for a long time. You know in organisations it is talent and culture that matter, and very few companies have what EA has. It's a little like asking if the New York Times is going to survive the move from physical distribution. You'd say probably, but it's going to take some work.

What kind of work?

It's easy for the New York Times. It gets ten times the readers online, but maybe two per cent of the money: you have to change business model.

What is the better business model?

They've got to stop using atoms.

Atoms?

Things you can hold in your hand. It's a huge cost to ship physical media. I'm on the Amazon board, and I walk past a physical store now and I think: 'How '80s'. They have no future. Most stores in the western world should be empty. They should be turned into community centres. I mean, you pay a lot to go to a store compared to going to Amazon, and you pay a lot to get a book or a newspaper and all it is is paying someone to cut down some trees and run them through a papermill. The next generation is just not going to pay the price. That's the 'Amazonification' of games, and it's going to happen whether we want it to or not. The majority of people are just not going to want to go to stores. As a delivery method they are going to be come as obsolete as vinyl and CDs are for music.



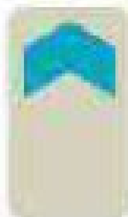


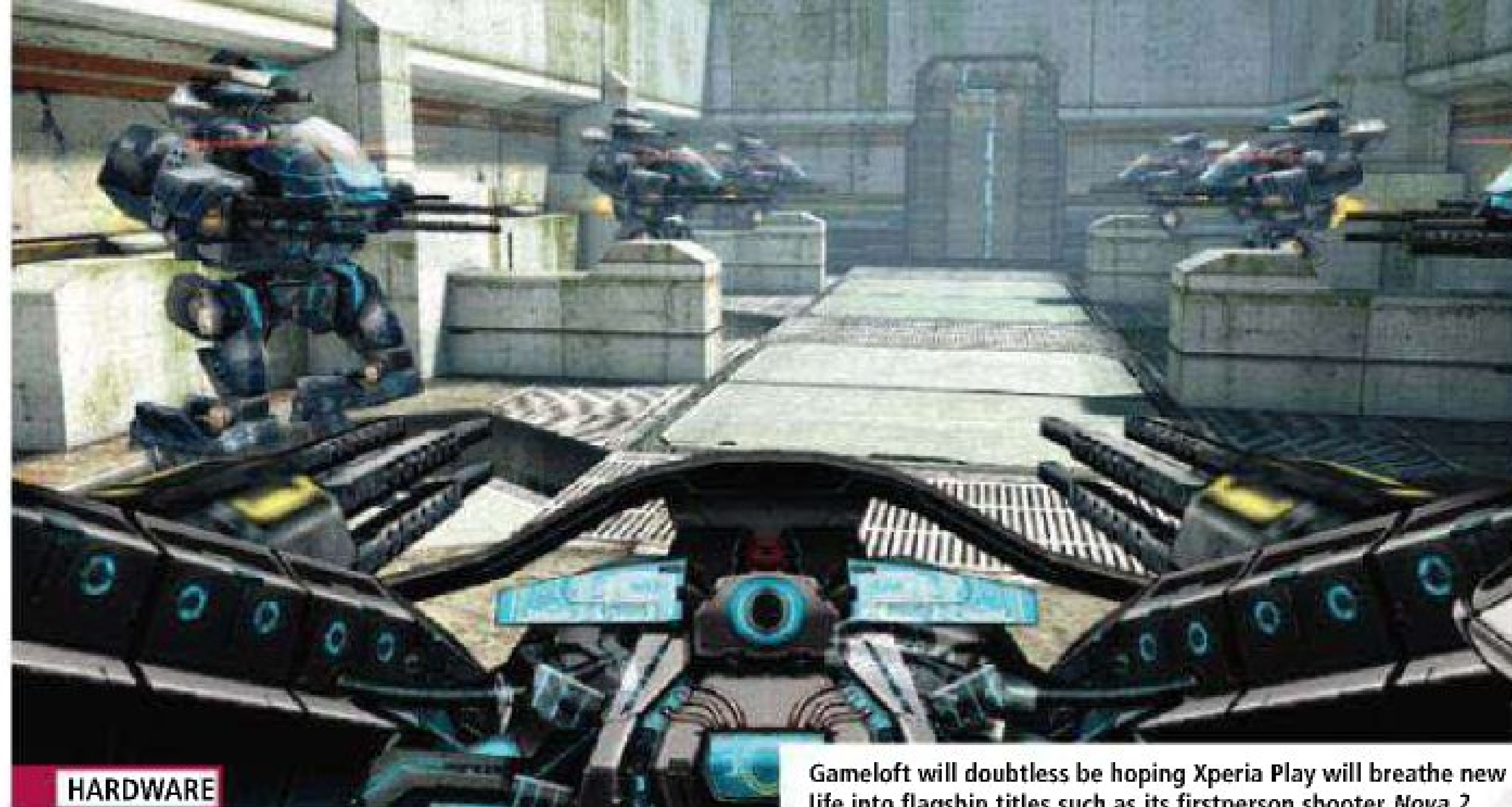


WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Nintendo's life before its Famicom isn't one often reminisced over in the age of Wii and 3DS, but the company's 'prehistory' is as fascinating as any of its recent innovations. Showcasing Erik Voskuil's expansive collection of Nintendo toys and games from the mid-'60s to '80s, Before Mario is as much a museum as a blog. Nintendo's line of Kousenjuu light beam guns, produced between 1970 and '76, are a clear precursor to the Super Scope which was released in the early '90s for the Super Nintendo. The Electronic Love Tester from 1969, however, has to be the highlight. Voskuil isn't merely listing the individual pieces of a collection that's taken 25 years to gather; he also provides detailed synopses for each item. As such, his blog is transformed from an archive into an exploration of a rich and colourful history.

Site:
Before Mario
URL:
blog.beforemario.com





HARDWARE

Gameloft will doubtless be hoping Xperia Play will breathe new life into flagship titles such as its firstperson shooter *Nova 2*

PlayStation cell power

Xperia Play combines an Android smartphone with a PlayStation controller, but which is the servant and which is the master?

Investigate Xperia Play's packaging and you'll discover a label that reads 'PlayStation Certified'. It's barely noticeable, given no more weight or space than other, now standard, smartphone features such as Bluetooth and 3G. Even out of the box, the phone hardly trumpets its gaming potential; it looks nearly identical to other Xperia models like the X10 and Arc. But Sony Ericsson equipped the Play to deal with all current Android games and, potentially, much more besides. Sliding out the phone's base reveals the controls: a PSP-style D-pad with shoulder buttons comfortably placed under your forefingers. A pair of circular trackpads take on the role of analogue sticks.

When you fire up the phone, there's still no reminder that you're operating a PlayStation-certified piece of hardware (there's no logo besides Sony Ericsson's on the casing, either). The frontend menus are standard Xperia, collecting the usual apps and features, though sliding out the gamepad provides a direct link to games optimised for the platform's four-inch, 480x854 display.

"It's got the power to attract what we call the recreational gamers, but it also caters for the traditional gamers who may have in the past looked down on mobile games"

Publisher Gameloft plans to back the device, optimising titles in its back catalogue to accommodate Play's features and 60fps capability. When we ask **Julian Stocker**, Gameloft's managing director, why Play could succeed where, for example, Nokia's N-Gage fizzled, he emphasises the Sony Computer Entertainment connection. "The Xperia Play may be a comparison [with the N-Gage], but it has the backing of PlayStation – the pedigree of a hugely successful games company – which we've never seen before [on a smartphone]," he says. "It's got the power to attract what we call the recreational gamers – people who go on to app stores and just play for a few minutes on the train – but it also caters for the traditional gamers who may have in the past looked down on mobile games. With this they've got something they recognise, that they're comfortable with."

To reel in these so-called traditional gamers, Play initially offers six PlayStation titles, all of which users can purchase and download directly from the Android marketplace. Naughty Dog's *Crash Bandicoot* comes preloaded on the handset in every territory except France, which gets *Syphon Filter* instead. For £4 each, highlights include *Destruction Derby* and the aforementioned stealth shooter, but it's a shame some of Sony's biggest-hitting software titles weren't ready for launch; the lure of *Wipeout*



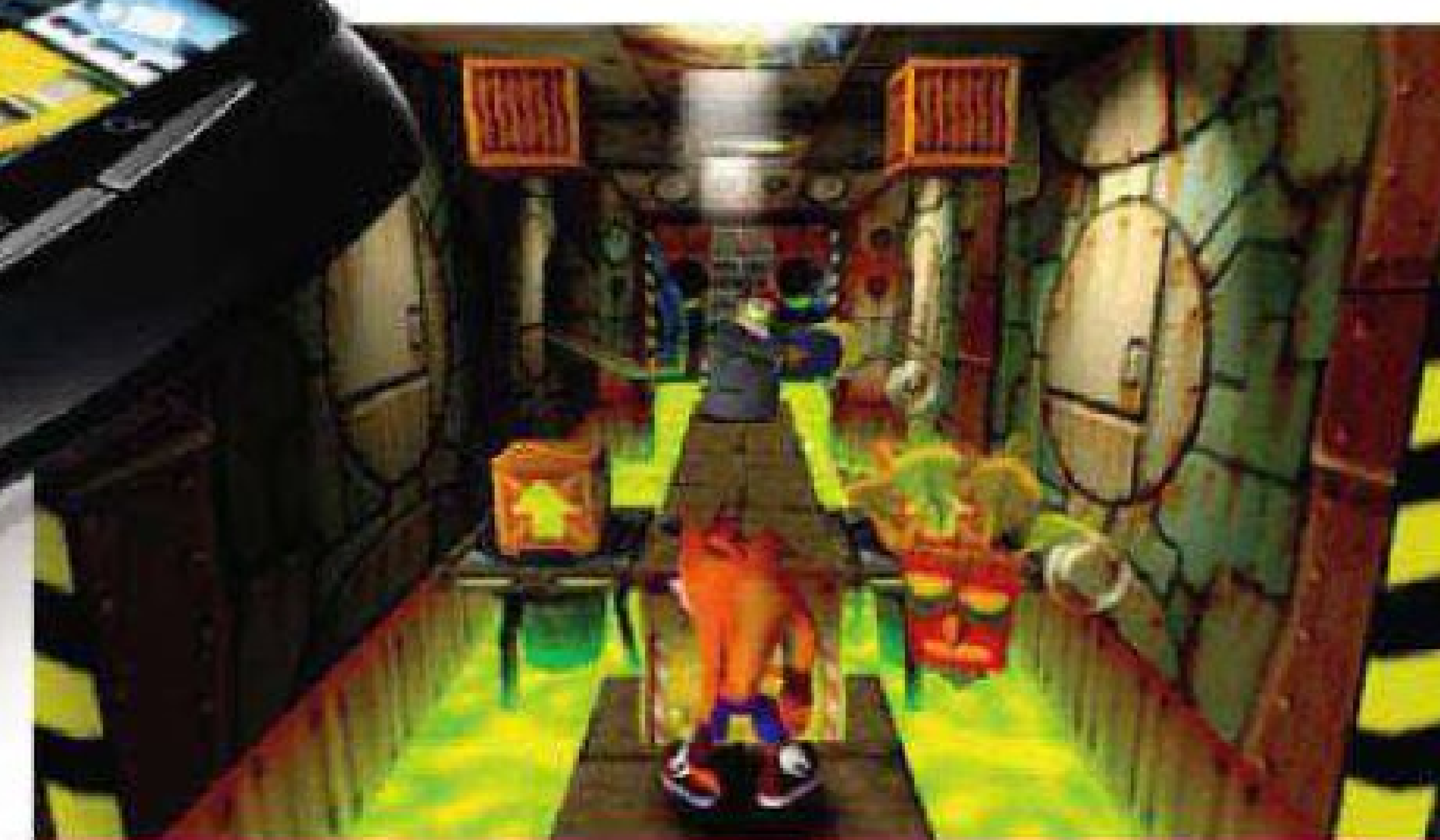
Under Xperia Play's shiny casing is a 1GHz Qualcomm Snapdragon processor and an Adreno 205 GPU to push out games at 60fps





Matt Beavis (left), Sony Ericsson's head of PR, and Julian Stocker, Gameloft's managing director, are confident that the Xperia Play is a step forward for smartphone gaming





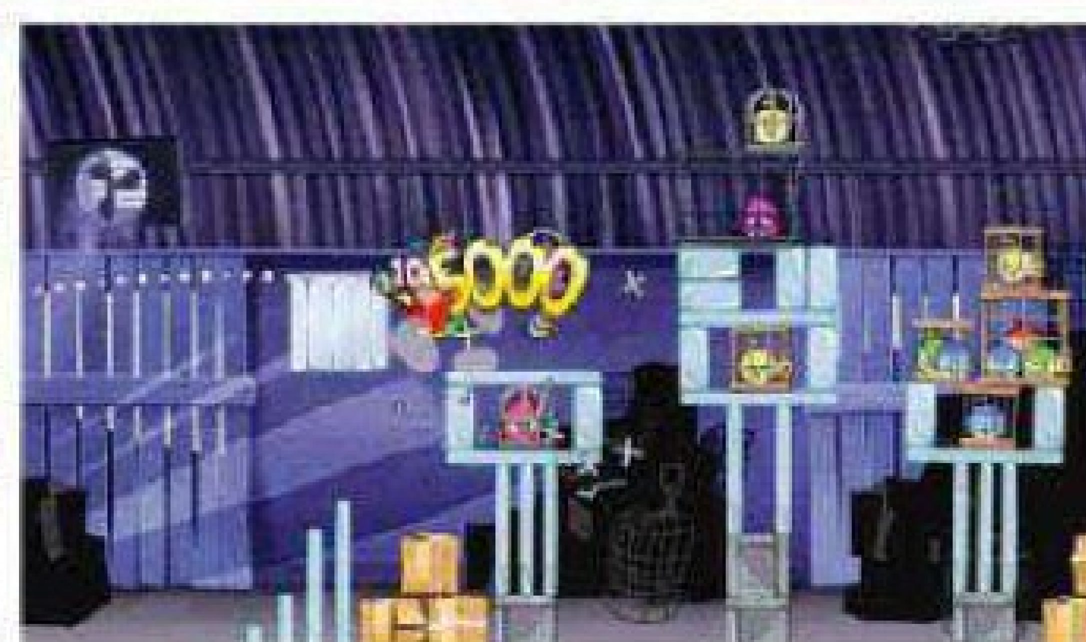
The unusual suspects

Crash and Gabe spearhead PlayStation's mobile invasion

Xperia Play's launch games are being driven by established PlayStation brands like *Crash Bandicoot* and *Syphon Filter*, with a curious mix of other PS titles – *Cool Boarders 2*, *Destruction Derby*, *Jumping Flash* and *MediEvil 2* – also available, and more imminent. It's *Jumping Flash* and *Destruction Derby* that provide the most obvious pick-up-and-play accessibility, their charms still strong over a decade since their debut.







Gameloft's *Backstab* (top) is Xperia Play exclusive for a month – if the platform is to capitalise on its potential, it would be encouraging to see more developers design titles for the hardware. Users also have access to all Android titles such as *Pew Pew 2* and *Angry Birds* (above)

or *Tekken* would be much stronger than these meagre initial offerings. Does Sony have any concerns about Play potentially undercutting its dedicated gaming portables, then? "First and foremost, Xperia Play is an Android smartphone that is optimised for playing games from the Android Market," says **Matt Beavis**, Sony Ericsson's head of PR and sponsorship. "It does not replace traditional gaming consoles such as NGP or PSP, which are dedicated gaming consoles."

The reality is that the Xperia Play, with a more aggressive strategy, could absolutely take on dedicated consoles. It's light enough to be portable (though still heavier than Apple's iPhone) and comfortable enough to be used for extended periods. It could, conceivably, be a successor to PSP Go, taking all of its design strengths and throwing in mobile connectivity and a touchscreen.

As it stands, Sony Ericsson has positioned Xperia Play as a jack of all trades, standing toe-to-toe with current-gen smartphones but little else. If it hopes to be a portable contender, the gloves won't come off until more appealing game software enters the ring.





THE WORLD OF YESTERDAY, TODAY

US-based videogame peripheral manufacturer Hyperkin is set to release a portable Super Nintendo in the US this summer. Few details have been announced, but the so-called SupaBoy takes classic SNES cartridges and displays them on a built-in screen. While the device may not win prizes for aesthetics, it does come packing some interesting features. More than just a handheld SNES (a dream partially realised by the Game Boy Advance), the SupaBoy has an AV output to allow it to be plugged into a television. You can also hook up two controllers to the device, transforming it into a... SNES?



● www.hyperkin.com



DEVELOPMENT

Albion jam

Lionhead's staff cut loose on personal projects – we check out what they pull out of the bag

It's Creative Day at Lionhead. As the *Fable III* team breathes a sigh of release at the pressing of its PC port, the studio's employees have been invited to put pent-up ingenuity to use, polishing off all manner of personal projects during a development jam session. Although some of the self-organised teams have been working together in their own time for many months, the bulk of Creative Day's presentations have been bashed into shape over the course of just two working days, plus many of the moonlit hours in between. Sleep-deprived, but buoyed along by high spirits and no small amount of caffeine, the teams take over Guildford's Odeon cinema to show off the fruits of their labour.

Although this is the first official Creative Day, the idea isn't an unfamiliar one to Lionhead – a company that has long cherished its creative culture. "Back in the early days we used to have 'make a game in an hour' challenges on a Friday lunchtime," says AI programmer **Neil Wallace**, who has put together an ingenious music synthesiser/visualiser, whereby the track is built up from the interaction of player-placed cogs, pulleys and old leather boots, combined into an elaborate Rube Goldberg mechanism.

What's striking is how many games exploit Kinect in new ways, which bodes well for the technology's use beyond the casual market

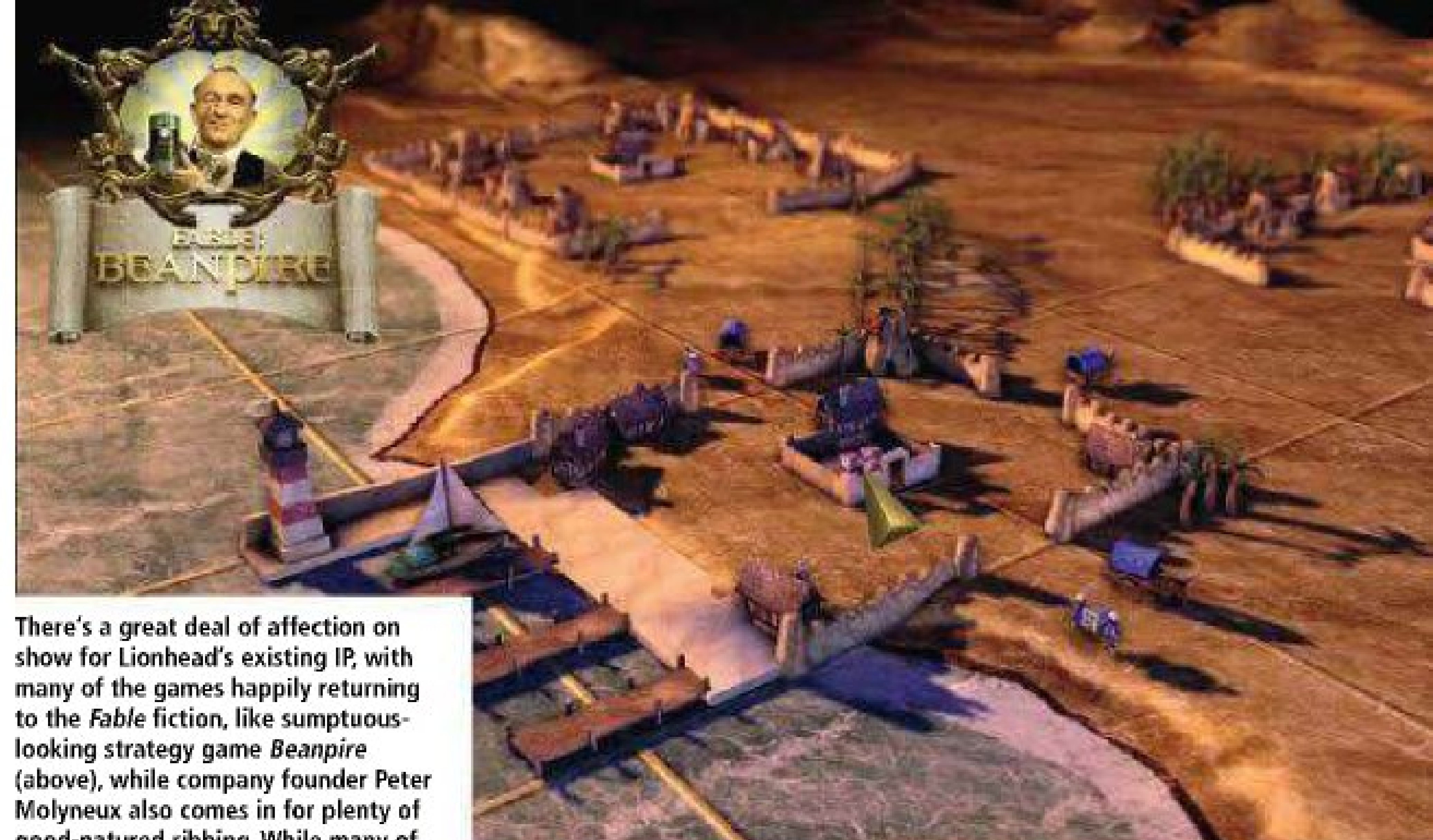
This internal enterprise has now taken on a more formal shape in the Creative Day, partly inspired by Google's policy of letting its staff use 20 per cent of their working hours to develop their own initiatives. The results are a tantalising glimpse behind the curtain of one of the UK's most prestigious developers. The 'anything goes' remit has given rise to a wide range of projects – some PowerPoint presentations of potential games, others polished playable demos or proofs of concept for technical trickery. What is striking is how many exploit Kinect in new ways – and for a studio so close to Microsoft, it bodes well for the technology's use beyond the casual market.

One of the first presentations is from **Adam Langridge**, lead gameplay programmer on an unannounced project within Lionhead, who has been trying to find ways of implementing a firstperson shooter using Kinect. Tackling aiming rather than movement, his demo consists of shooting bottles and cans from a fence using only a pair of fingers. In a cutely intuitive touch, firing is detected when the player's hand jerks upwards, in replication of a gun's kick.

"It's like when you pretend to be a cowboy as a kid," he explains to us later. "When you don't stick your fingers out it doesn't feel as good. Getting rid of the crosshair actually helped as well. You just fire and you see where the bullet hits, and then try again – your brain goes: 'Oh, I've learnt something there'. It's like when you learn to throw a ball. There's some amazing learning hardware in your brain which works out what it all means, that having a crosshair disables."

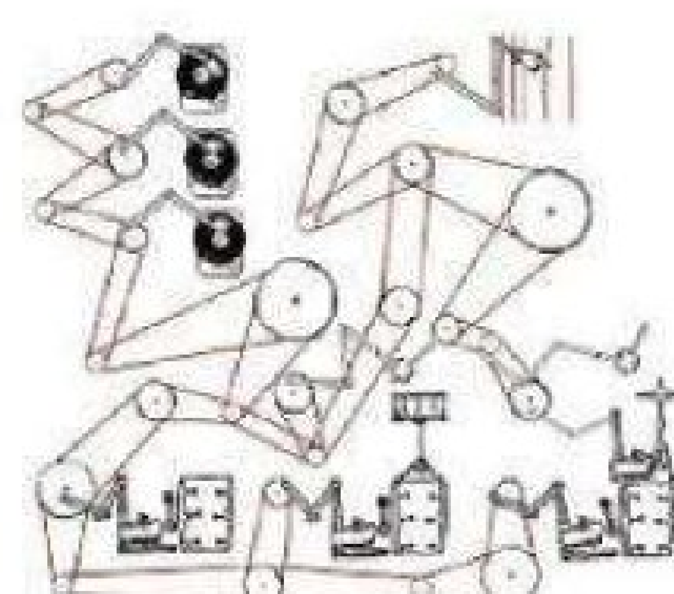
Other developers show off a Kinect tank battler, the movement of its two tracks achieved independently by moving your arms forward as though operating separate gear sticks; a Kinect-controlled space combat game, its various firing modes activated by the buttons of a mouse held aloft in one hand; and a *Pilotwings*-style Kinect title in which a chicken-suited aeronaut's trajectory is directed by the player's head (the detection of which is enhanced by a comely chicken hat).

Guy Simmons, a lead designer, has created a *Lemmings*-esque game incorporating Kinect's ability to map depth – the silhouette of your body can be used to extrude blocks from a sheer cliff





There's a great deal of affection on show for Lionhead's existing IP, with many of the games happily returning to the *Fable* fiction, like sumptuous-looking strategy game *Beanpire* (above), while company founder Peter Molyneux also comes in for plenty of good-natured ribbing. While many of the demos suggest enhancements to the process of development, or hint at possible directions for future games, some simply exist for their own sake – like the blocky *Quake*-like shooter *FablDed* (below), built to repurpose *Fable*'s editor itself (below right)



"It works because you can see the relationships between the cogs and pulleys," says Wallace of his music maker/visualiser OneManBand (above). "A bigger cog turns slower, so the beat will be slower. You can change the phase too"





Above: Tak Saito shows off his chicken hat, which helps Kinect detect the angle of the player's head, allowing him to direct his birdman through hoops (left). Lift is attained by doing squats



Designer Charles Griffiths says his team's side-scrolling platformer *Shuffle* was made primarily to titillate an audience whose preconceptions had been shaped by making games: "You see the GUI and you make certain judgments about it and write it off as something you are familiar with, so I wanted to play with that"





face, providing platforms for AI-controlled bunnies to reach an exit. Simmons says his interest in the technology is more about augmenting player actions than the one-to-one puppetry of Avatars.

"Augmenteering is where your body controls something in the world, but it's more than what you are," he says. "For example, in a superhero game, when you throw a punch it's not just a one-to-one mirror of the player – it's a super punch. When you think about that augmentation in other contexts, you start to think about the kind of controllers that hands can be."

It's an idea extended by some of Simmons' colleagues in a side-scrolling platformer, spiced with surprising Kinect gimmickry. Suddenly, the small window which displays Kinect's view of the player – usually a static piece of feedback – comes loose and falls into the level: the player is able to move it around by reaching beyond the edges of the box, grabbing the scenery and dragging.

There are other fulsome demos, too – a *Descent*-style shooter set inside the human body; a turn-based tactical game using *Fable III* assets; a puzzle game in which you chaperone bees to pollen; a business-building strategy game based around the export of beans from Albion to Aurora; a fast-paced FPS built from a repurposed version of *Fable*'s editor itself; and a surprisingly workable shooter employing just one dimension – all the action restricted to a single horizontal line.

Some of the greatest single innovations are reserved for the tech demonstrations – a way of marrying conventional skeletal animation to a fluid blob monster, which can be cut into globules before reforming as one; a co-op version of *Populous*, executed in HTML5; a tuning interface for designers, which allows them to twiddle with the dials of a MIDI controller to tweak elements of the gameworld in realtime, like weather, lighting effects and atmospheric fogging; an efficient means of deploying video in place of sprites; and a means of dynamically altering materials in-game, allowing spells to scorch or freeze the environment. We would be very surprised if some of these tricks don't make their way into commercial Lionhead games in the future.

Indeed, some of the things on show are promising enough that we've been forbidden from speaking about them, lest they evolve into actual releases. Clearly, if only for that reason alone, the Creative Day has proved a success for Lionhead, and founder **Peter Molyneux** suggests that this will become an annual event for the studio. But more important than the commercial validity of the projects that emerge from this effort is the energy it instils in the participants. The atmosphere is jubilant and familial – but it's not just the result of the *Fable III* team coming off crunch; it comes from fostering and recognising creativity. As Molyneux says: "The ideas we have as a studio shouldn't just come from people like me. We should all be inspired by each other." And if Lionhead gets to ship a few more titles as a result, that's hardly an unwelcome side effect.



Adam Langridge put his finger-pointing Kinect shooter together in an absurdly short time. "Then I got drunk and it was a disaster. There's a sweet spot where you're half a beer in, but after that it's downhill. So I was up until half two last night finishing it off"

Continue

Child Of Eden
The most beautiful thing on television

Wii HD
And a new *Super Mario Galaxy*, please, thank you

The new-look **Edge**
You're ready for scores out of one million, right?

Quit

Apocalyptic squalor
It seems the first casualty of war is house pride

Zombies
We think we've got the idea now. Time to RIP

'Hardcore' Wii shooters
Like fitting a square peg into a warp pipe

SOUND BYTES

"It makes things very awkward when your male companions keep making passes at you. The fact that a 'no homosexuality' option, which could have been easily implemented, is omitted just proves my point."
Demonstrating a slightly tenuous understanding of game development, a **BioWare forum user** highlights *Dragon Age II*'s cruel discrimination against homophobic male players

"A TV show will have about 400 lines of dialogue and a whole film with have 1,500-2,000 lines of dialogue. With a game like *Modern Warfare* we had about 42,000 lines of dialogue... Bringing in film and TV actors who aren't used to that amount of content and then sustaining those performances is a real challenge."
Call Of Duty director **Keith Arem** discusses the patience-sapping difficulty of achieving consistency in all 42,000 instances of "MASON!"

"People got drunk, people smoked on balconies, and we ended up in a hotel suite eating white bread and some kind of peanut butter/gingerbread paste. As alluring as this lifestyle is, I'm more excited about the oscilloscope I ordered last week."
Minecraft creator **Markus 'Notch' Persson** tests the rockstar dev lifestyle (courtesy of an invitation by internet entrepeneur Sean Parker)

"A strong visual identity tends to polarise the mainstream audience. With budgets only going up and teams getting bigger, with pressure increasing to generate more revenue faster, there is understandably a tendency on most developers' part to play it safe and stay within a comfort zone."
Guild Wars 2 art director **Daniel Dociu** explains the prevalence of the generic

"Back in the *Quake 1* days I was like, 'You know, I have these maps we can fix up and they'll just be deathmatch-only maps', and John Romero was like: 'That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard!'"
Id Software's **Tim Willits** recalls the spluttering early days of FPS innovation

"But if there are no horses, what do we sell armour for?"
Skyrim's DLC strategy is thrown into disarray when Bethesda's VP of PR and marketing **Pete Hines** learns that mounts may not make it into the game



DEVELOPMENT

Toy story

Developer Toys For Bob explains a unique melding of real and virtual

During playtesting for its upcoming reboot of the *Spyro* franchise, *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure*, developer Toys For Bob brought in countless children to see how they interacted with the game. Playtesting has become a standard part of any game-development cycle, but it would prove especially vital in the case of *Skylanders* – the first project to blur the line between console videogames and collectible toys.

Skylanders invites you to bring your characters to life in the gameworld by placing the corresponding toy on a circular peripheral called the 'Portal of Power'. Tired of playing as Spyro? Or maybe you need a character with a different attack style to complete a tricky section of a level? No problem, just swap Spyro out on the Portal for Eruptor or Gill Grunt or any one of the other 30 or more characters available for purchase. Each toy automatically saves its character state internally, allowing you to drop your favourite character on a Portal at a friend's house and co-star in their adventure with experience level and customisations intact. The concept oozes gadget-nerd appeal, but the question remains: how will children take to this new breed of videogame interaction?

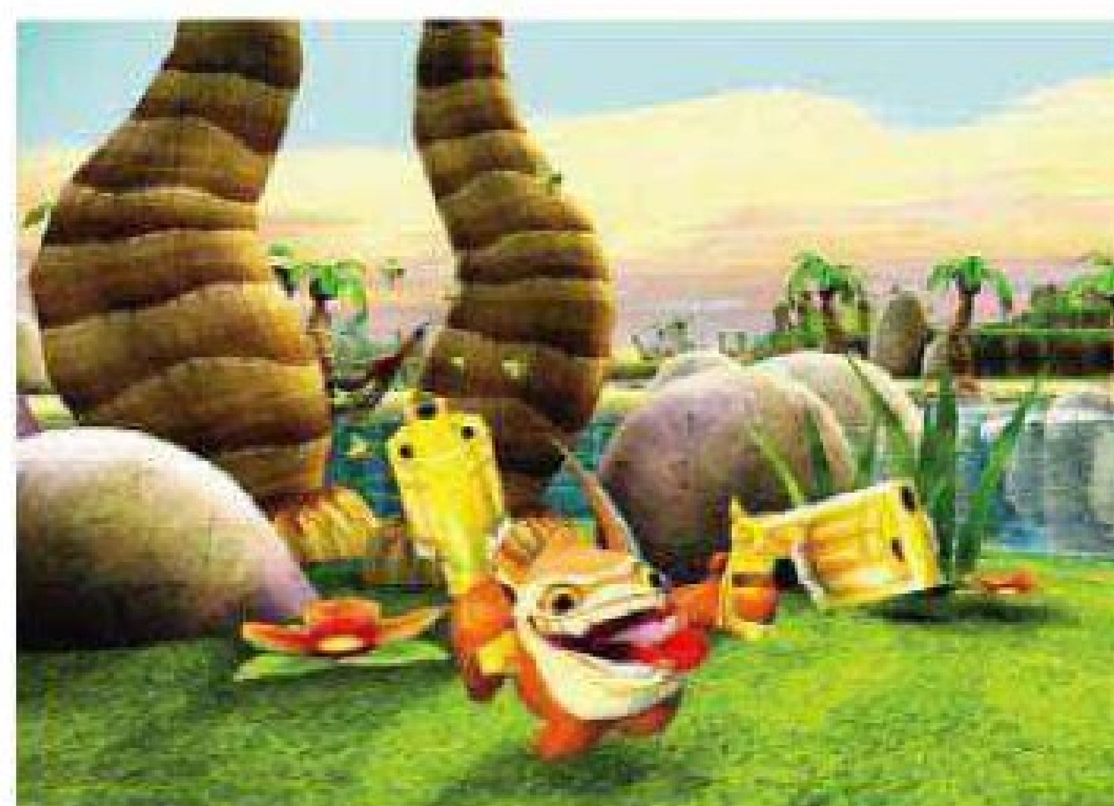
"We've got some characters that could work in a D&D game, and then we've got some that lean towards Miyamoto character design – cute, lovable and kind of chunky"

"It's definitely much less cerebral for them," explains Toys For Bob studio head **Paul Reiche III**, who designed the *Skylanders* concept and built the original prototype himself. "[Kids] don't necessarily know the distinction between toys and games and computers and hypermedia and transmedia.

"I watched a six-year-old in one playtest – and that's at the very young end of the age range for complete play – and he was using some of our preliminary toys that don't look as cool. Then he saw a fully painted, fully decorated one, and he just reached over and grabbed it. It wasn't one of the ones he was supposed to play with, but he put it on the Portal, and when the character came alive, he was like: 'Oh, you're my lucky charm!' I ended up giving it to him because he was so attached to it. And you've got to understand, there aren't many of these in the world, so it was a big deal."

Given the extent of Activision's financial investment in *Skylanders*' creation, the publisher clearly expects *Skylanders* to have a similarly profound psychological effect on every child who guides their toy from imaginative play in the real world to heroic exploits in Skyland. The screenwriting team of Joel Cohen and Alec







Your in-game character can be swapped at any time by replacing the toy on the game's Portal of Power. If you need a solid ranged attack, Trigger Happy (above) might be your best option. Right: Paul Reiche III, head of *Skylanders* developer Toys For Bob, got his start at D&D creator TSR, but has been working in videogames for decades







Each character has an element class; Eruptor's fire attack (left) makes short work of water baddies. The Portal of Power (right) changes colour to match the element class of the toy placed on it











Sokolow – who bagged an Oscar nomination for a certain Pixar animated film in which toys also come magically to life – will pen *Skylanders*' singleplayer campaign, while acclaimed composer Hans Zimmer has signed on to create the game's musical score. There will inevitably be a stream of imitators, and Activision wants to make sure they all look flimsy and second-rate by comparison.

Toys For Bob's marriage of physical toys and videogames may provide a convenient marketing hook – 'toys with brains', etc – but there are deeper advantages to the *Skylanders* concept than merely the word-of-mouth buzz generated by a novel interaction model.

"We were talking with some of the guys from Infinity Ward," says Reiche, "and they were really confronting their piracy issues and unauthorised play and rental, and I just – my eyes got wide and I laughed and said: 'Ha ha! We don't have to worry about that!' because no one rents toys. It wasn't intentional, but boy I've used that subsequently every time I feel like I have to pitch to the executives again. They're like: 'Fine, let them copy the software, it'll just motivate them to go out and engage in the activity we want them to, which is purchasing more toys.'"

While Toys For Bob designed the *Skylanders* toys to appeal to a younger audience, older gamers who've dabbled in tabletop RPGs will notice they seem to embody the tradition of hand-painted miniatures. This is no mere coincidence. Reiche himself comes from a background in Dungeons & Dragons. He and his schoolfriends spent a lot of time playing D&D, even going so far as to create their own companion books for the game, which they sold at conventions, at least until the American IRS called to politely inquire when they were planning to pay taxes. The experience may have confronted Reiche with the more tedious side of entrepreneurship, but it also landed him his first real job – as a designer at D&D creator TSR. Reiche is credited with designing the thri-kreen, insectoid warriors that feature in several D&D campaigns.

Reiche never grew out of his love for monsters and fantasy lore. He made toys for himself and his children, and even after his kids were grown up he continued modelling and casting rubber monsters in his spare time. When Activision sent out a call for pitches on how to bring new life to the *Spyro* franchise, Reiche pitched a couple of ideas, including the idea of bringing toys to life with the Portal. When the publisher invited him to show it what he had in mind, he went to Toys For Bob senior artist and modeller I-Wei Huang, and the two of them started drafting character designs. "We've got some characters that could work in a D&D game," says Reiche, "and then we've got some that lean towards Miyamoto character design – very cute, very lovable and kind of chunky."

Hearing Miyamoto's name mentioned only tangentially in a conversation about marrying toys and videogames feels strange. How did Nintendo allow Activision to beat it to this idea in the first place? After all, Nintendo's *Pokémon* franchise, with its 'gotta catch 'em all' premise, would have been the perfect candidate for a title involving collectable toy figurines that players bring to life in-game. Nintendo obviously has the toy company roots to pull off the toy line. And Nintendo's the publisher that has become renowned for innovative gameplay interactions. Toys For Bob and Activision may have a head start, but they certainly anticipate other large publishers following suit.

"We've had a collection of talent and resources and just sort of blind faith that I think would be hard for someone else who isn't the size of Activision to pull off," says Reiche. "You've got your Nintendos and your Sonys and your Microsofts and then, after that, there aren't too many other folks who will be able to follow quickly. We're a couple of years ahead of them already. The executives at Activision looked at the original [*Skylanders*] hardware and said: 'You know, this is a big enough deal that we would like you to knock this out of the park'."

Making monsters

How Spyro met the undead dragon

Reiche and Huang worked together closely to create the designs for each of the 30+ characters in *Skylanders* (apart from the game's returning star Spyro, of course). Reiche would typically describe to Huang the origin story for whatever character he had in mind and then let the artist dash out ten or so versions of the monster. But Reiche couldn't spend all his time chatting about character designs: "Sometimes I'd say, 'I-Wei, I have to go and be studio head for a couple days – just draw monsters'. Then I'd come back and it would be like: 'Oh, cool! There's an undead dragon – awesome! This guy's definitely in there'."

INCOMING

Botanicula
FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **AMANITA DESIGN**



Some good news from Amanita: *Machinarium* is headed for PS3 and *Samorost 3* is on the way. Not to be overshadowed, however, is point'n'click title *Botanicula*, about tree creatures on the run

Reich Downfall
FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **UTV IGNITION**



Allegedly being 'reworked' by Ignition, this nazi-killing FPS looks like the lovechild of *Soldier Of Fortune* and *Killzone*. Fans of schlock, horror and slo-mo deaths should keep an eye on it

Choplifter HD
FORMAT: **PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **INXILE**



The Apple II action game gets refurbished nearly 30 years on. Gameplay looks to be the same mix of rescues and rockets, but there's a worrying absence of purple floor textures

Amy
FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **VECTORCELL**



In *Flashback* creator Paul Cuisset's downloadable survival horror, holding the hand of adolescent Amy is the only way to avoid viral infection. And holding a crowbar the only way to beat up mutants

Pandora's Tower
FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



Ganbarion's output has been territorially restricted in the past (we're still waiting on *Jump Super Stars*), but this Wii *God Of War*-alike will surely have enough appeal for a worldwide release

SSX
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



The silly sports series returns to revamp a neglected genre. A drip-feed of details outlines a Deadly Descents mode in which making it to the bottom of the mountain alive is the goal. Chilling

Solatorobo: Red The Hunter
FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



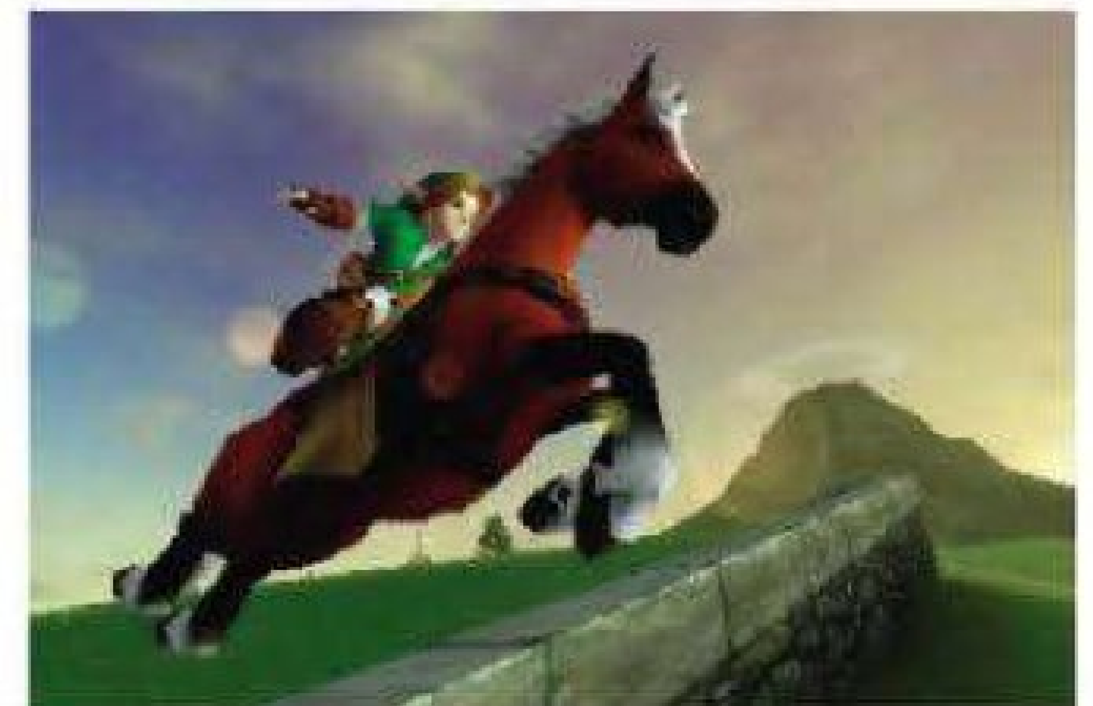
It's good to see original content still winging its way to DS, and better still to see it localised and now set to be published in PAL territories. Puzzles, platforming and animals flying planes await

Resident Evil Revival Selection
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



Has it really been over a decade since *Code Veronica* shook up *Resi's* prerendered world? This resurrected double-header includes *RE4*. Motion control is surely just an announcement away

Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time 3D
FORMAT: **3DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



With the US release date confirmed for June 19, a date for Europe can't be far off. It's been a while since we took a walk around Kakariko village, or galloped hard across Hyrule's open fields



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Sky Island
tinyurl.com/skyisle

Phil Fish's puzzler *Fez* has been a long time coming. Clearly the wait has proved intolerable for developer Neutronized, since *Sky Island* redeploys a familiar candy-coloured pixel style and spatial trickery in its own smart platformer. As with *Fez*, and the more recent *Paper Mario* games, the world is presented as a 2D platformer with a hidden third dimension that allows you to reconfigure the geometry by switching perspective.

Here, grabbing and dragging with the mouse allows you to spin the world into 3D, revealing hidden components. Let the level settle back into one of the planes, and the new 2D perspective compresses together the separate 3D layers, allowing you to fuse once-distant objects as contiguous surfaces. Each level contains a number of hidden stars which you must hunt before seeking the exit, spinning the environment through its various planes to transport yourself across impassable gaps or through barriers, avoiding beasties as you go. As *Fez's* development proceeds, this perspective trickery may be just the thing to help ease the wait.

Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

The rise and rise of social gaming

Piers Harding-Rolls examines the latest data in the social network gaming market

We were wrong. We under-called growth in the PC-based social network games market in 2010 – we did not foresee the immense popularity of *CityVille* from Zynga, which broke all monthly active user records established by *FarmVille*, nor did we expect the success of the platform to result in a boost in users for other big titles in Zynga's portfolio. While the market stuttered in the early months of 2010, as Facebook changed its notification processes and the largest titles of 2009 started to recede, performance in the second half of 2010 helped grow the size of the market by over 100 per cent on the previous year. We have now sized the global market at £0.9 billion for 2010. This performance far outstrips growth in other digital sectors, and starts to position social network games as a core pillar of the digital games opportunity alongside MMOGs, online console sales, mobile and (traditional) PC casual games.



We have now sized the global social gaming market at £0.9 billion for 2010, which starts to position this sector as a core pillar of the digital games opportunity

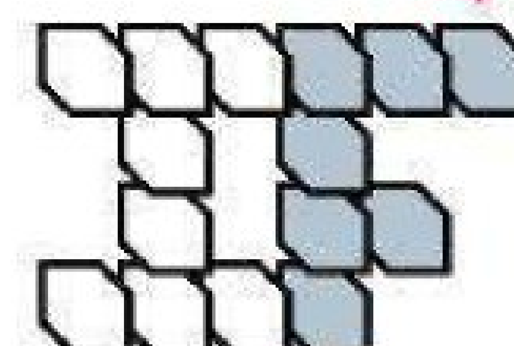
Our numbers currently track the PC-based social network games opportunity, but it is clear there is fragmentation of the social network game audience with regard to the types of device used to access content. The biggest developing upheaval is centred on the use of mobile devices to access networks and their relevant games, which is likely to grow the overall opportunity but may lead to some negative impact on PC-based spending.

On a simple level, some operators have released games on mobile platforms through application





Zynga's *FarmVille* (above and left) was launched in 2009 on Facebook and in 2010 on iOS. An expansion, entitled English Countryside, was launched this year. The game won the Best New Social/Online Game award at 2010's GDC, beating titles by PopCap, PlayFish and SCE









***CityVille* (above left and top) was launched in late 2010 and casts players as the mayor of a virtual city in much the same way as *SimCity*. It claims to have attracted 100,000 players on its first day, and has 19 million daily users. *Zynga Poker* (above right) launched in 2007 and boasts seven million daily users**

stores which require a Facebook login and which count towards our tracked PC-based monthly active user figures. A key example of this approach is by Zynga. The company has released both *Zynga Poker* and *FarmVille* on the Apple App Store. Both games require a Facebook login. A majority of these are likely to be connected to existing Zynga game accounts accessed through PCs, but it is inevitable that some will have been established through the mobile app. Crucially, due to the Facebook login we believe these users are tracked in terms of MAUs for these games as reported by Facebook. Both allow for purchasing of in-game currency and, where relevant, users play against or with PC users – therefore we acknowledge that there is some overlap of users and spend between mobile and PC users of this content where social network content and its users have been extended on to mobile devices through the use of apps.

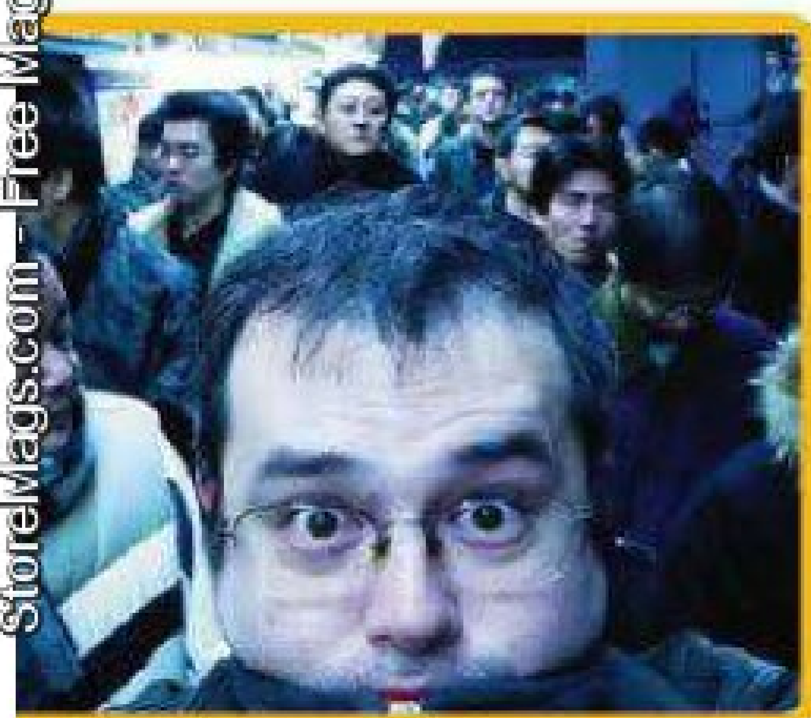
While this sort of industry development is a challenge to filter with regard to our PC-based social network games market sizing, there is a separate mobile social network games market which is additional to our market data mentioned above. These involve games played on mobile social networks and not just extended PC-based social networks. This is currently centred on the Japanese market through companies such as DeNA, but is expected to make inroads into western markets during 2011 – many of the 'traditional' PC social network game operators are developing mobile strategies. Spend on mobile social network games in Japan during 2010 was over £387 million, suggesting a combined social network games market size of around £1.3 billion. The crossplatform development of social network games will only increase the market's potential. As such, we expect quite a lot more from this particular opportunity.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Back to basics

Christophe Kagotani sees a nation reverting from luxury to economy in trying times



What should I be writing about? I was considering not mentioning the quakes at all this time. I wanted to focus on videogames, particularly the trend for Japanese franchises to be dumped overseas, and how that now applies to anime too. But I find myself returning to the quakes because they're now part of my everyday life. So here we go again…

On March 11, we were hit twice, then a third time a few days later. At the time of writing it's far from over. Radiation is still an issue, and strong aftershocks are felt on a daily basis.

Many people would like to return to business as usual or, at least, begin looking to the future. But, as we try to move on, there's an unspoken understanding that things won't ever be the same. We can't even approach normality right now, and because specialists inform us that we will be 'dealing with it' for the next five years, the idea of planning out a life strategy or a career is an incomprehensible one.

Rewind to the start of the year – my year of change. Hitting 40, a baby on the way, and new professional opportunities with deeper involvement in game development… I had a lot in store for me. I was to work on a project from its birth, rather than simply being called at the end to extinguish fires (when it's usually too late). I'd been chasing the opportunity for some time.

My first challenge? Get a new phone.

It was the perfect time to change my three-year-old Docomo for something more 'now'. Android had just been localised, but the software and the environment still felt clunky. The iPhone seemed better but lacked many of the features integral for a Japanese lifestyle. So, I took the best Docomo could offer. A mobile (rather than a smart) phone, but quite advanced nonetheless.

I'm glad I didn't opt for a smartphone, and here's why: there's a feature that I was unaware of, available on all mobiles produced since last year except smartphones. It kicks in automatically: a very irritating alarm that triggers at maximum volume – even if you have your mobile on silent.

Many people would like to return to business as usual or, at least, begin looking to the future. But, as we try to move on, there's an unspoken understanding that things won't ever be the same

What is it? The quake alert messaging system from the Earthquake Early Warning system.

It's not perfect, by any stretch. It didn't trigger on March 11, for example. But, realistically, it works eight out of ten times. It gives you two or three precious seconds before the shock reaches you. You can either find shelter or run for it. Two seconds is everything in the event of a quake.

Nowadays, however, my alert goes off every

single day. What was supposed to be a unique emergency warning has become horribly, devastatingly familiar. I was recently having coffee and – because everyone now has that feature – all the phones in the place triggered at the exact same time. It was genuinely frightening.

When I was debating whether to go with a smartphone or standard mobile, the handsets were marketed on their OS. Now, it's all about whether they have the quake alarm. Operators are trying to get a smartphone equivalent in place as soon as possible, but so far nothing is working.

I know what you're thinking – why are we so concerned now, when it's too late? Well, you see, at the time of writing, the Big One has not hit yet. The one that is supposed to shake the entire Kanto region. As tremors intensify as they head south, you can't afford to be unprepared. I wouldn't be surprised if gaming devices implement a form of quake alert soon, especially if we have to live with major tremors for years to come.

What if a major quake happens in Kanto when it's your district's turn to suffer a three-hour power cut this summer? Your TV won't tell you, nor your Android phone or iPhone.

Before the quakes, people were all about the latest features to suit their frenzied mobile and digital lifestyles. Now, they go for the essentials. We are relearning how to live with the essentials, far from the luxury we were used to, and took for granted, just weeks ago. As things return to a more normal state in Tokyo's supermarkets, at some point we will likely return to the comforts of the old Tokyo we once knew. Or will we? The changes in our technology, and the marketing of it to meet our needs, are a reflection of our state of mind, our changing – and changed – lives.

I wanted to write about games, but ended up writing about the quake again instead. But what I've learnt, and hope you have too, is that the quake is affecting all of Japan, from its people to its technology. It's something we're all living with, including all of the gamers and game companies here.


Earth Defense Force 2 Portable


Final Fantasy IV Complete Collection

Mediacreate Japanese sales, April 4–10

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Earth Defense Force 2 Portable*** (D3, PSP) 63,795 (NE)
2. ***Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2 Professional*** (Square Enix, NDS) 42,397 (205,405)
3. ***Ebicore + Amagami*** (Kadokawa Games, PSP) 23,849 (93,070)
4. ***Final Fantasy IV Complete Collection*** (Square Enix, PSP) 19,392 (154,946)
5. ***Dynasty Warriors 7*** (Tecmo Koei, PS3) 17,002 (400,608)
6. ***Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*** (Capcom, PSP) 12,060 (4,429,577)
7. ***Kimi Ni Todoke: Tsutaeru Kimochi*** (Namco Bandai, NDS) 11,229
8. ***Nintendogs + Cats*** (Nintendo, 3DS) 10,997 (182,519)
9. ***Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy*** (Square Enix, PSP) 9,484 (428,619) (NE)
10. ***Phantasy Star Portable 2 Infinity*** (Sega, PSP) 8,822 (321,241)


TBC





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Batman: Arkham City



POW! BAM! There'll be no Adam West-era pop art, alas, but the promise of a chunk of Gotham to swoop over still has us cracking our knuckles in anticipation.
360, PC, PS3, WARNER BROS

Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One



After *Move Heroes*, it's good to see Insomniac back in control. With levels designed around fourplayer co-op, *All 4 One* looks set to usher the series into the connected world.
PS3, SCE

XCOM



We're eager to see how 2K Marin's fedora physics fare now *LA Noire* has raised the bar for hat-based interactions with its automated Errant Hat Retrieval System.
360, PC, 2K GAMES

The Chewbacca offence

Getting people playing together is like herding Wookies



***Uncharted 3*'s multiplayer pairs you up with another player via a buddy system incentivised by XP boosts and mid-action spawns. But is this XP bribery enough to force team cohesion?**

This won't be news to *Battlefield* players, but people can be desperately stupid. People don't know what they're doing, or why they're there. People don't care that their team is about to lose its final base, or that their team is waging a woefully undersupported assault. People just seem to like crouching next to a bush at the back of the map, dolled up in their Ghillie suits, facing the wrong way to scan a horizon over which no enemy troops will ever surge. *Battlefield* vets call them Chewbaccas, because of the fluffy rendering of their sniper garb. And the question that haunts any developer whose game necessitates cooperation is how to get Chewbaccas off their furry behinds and into battle, where preferably they will end up shooting the right people at least some of the time.

Player-vs-AI co-op modes, like Horde and Firefight, skirt around this problem by making the key issue one of simple survival. Separation largely means death. There is no easy way to camp in Horde – the Locust come for you eventually, wherever you are, and you'd better hope someone's got your back. For more complex team tactics, getting people to work together proves quite a problem.

It's particularly an issue for *Resident Evil: Raccoon City* and its fourplayer co-op campaign. Like similarly zombie-themed co-op horror shooter *Left 4 Dead*, survival depends on tight coordination. It's an even more delicate balance, in fact, since *Raccoon City*'s team members have strongly differentiated skillsets – and, as with *Left 4 Dead*, you can only have one of each flavour. While it might be annoying to find that everyone always dashes to nab the stealthy ice-cool Spectre rather than a medic called (of all things) Bertha, this does at least force a balance of classes. But will everyone end up playing to their strengths? Would you trust Chewie with a syringe?

XP incentives may work for some players – but it's worth noting that *Battlefield* includes them too. *Bulletstorm*'s entire multiplayer is built around the points boost gained from cooperation, and yet it rarely occurs in the wild. Perhaps the only solution to Chewbacca is the one *Left 4 Dead* pioneers – making their fatal idiocy part of your own personal horror story.



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360, PS3



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360, PC, PS3



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360, PS3

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3DS

48 **Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D**
3DS

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2012**

Dragon's Dogma

Capcom's newest monster hunter swaps shining armour for sharpened blades



Who would have thought that yet another fantasy game could seem so different? The trailer for *Dragon's Dogma* immediately recalls the sweeping, flame-belching trailer for *Skyrim*, or the grimy cruelness of *Demon's Souls,* or every other swords-and-sorcery title to have hauled its scaly bulk across the protesting Earth. However, the immediate familiarity of *Dragon's Dogma* ceases to matter once you realise it's a Capcom game.

It's easy to take one look at *Dragon's Dogma* and conclude it must be some form of RPG. It's certainly a fantasy game, but roleplaying elements are entirely absent – knuckle-whitening violence is more important than levelling up. The game's director **Hideaki Itsuno** is certain it stands up well against his previous efforts. "We think this is one of the greatest action games that we've ever made," he boasts. No small words from the man responsible for the past two *Devil May Cry* games.

Mere seconds of play are enough to suggest that Itsuno's words aren't empty. Your first encounter with a group of goblins might feel like generic fantasy, but it's not long before you're interrupted by a griffin capable of scattering your party just by beating its huge wings – and this is one of the smaller creatures you'll face. For a standard RPG this might signal the beginning of a tiresome grind – all ankle hacking and volleys of ineffectual arrows – but *Dragon's Dogma* rolls a different set of dice. Before long you're clinging to the back of the beast, attempting to ground it while the members of your fellowship pepper it with ranged attacks from below. There are no limitations on how you bring down the creatures – you can grab any part you can reach via helpful leg-ups from your party. The battered armour and dull iron of traditional fantasy games might be present, but unresponsive, stat-checking combat is as unwelcome here as Grendel in Hroðgar's hall.

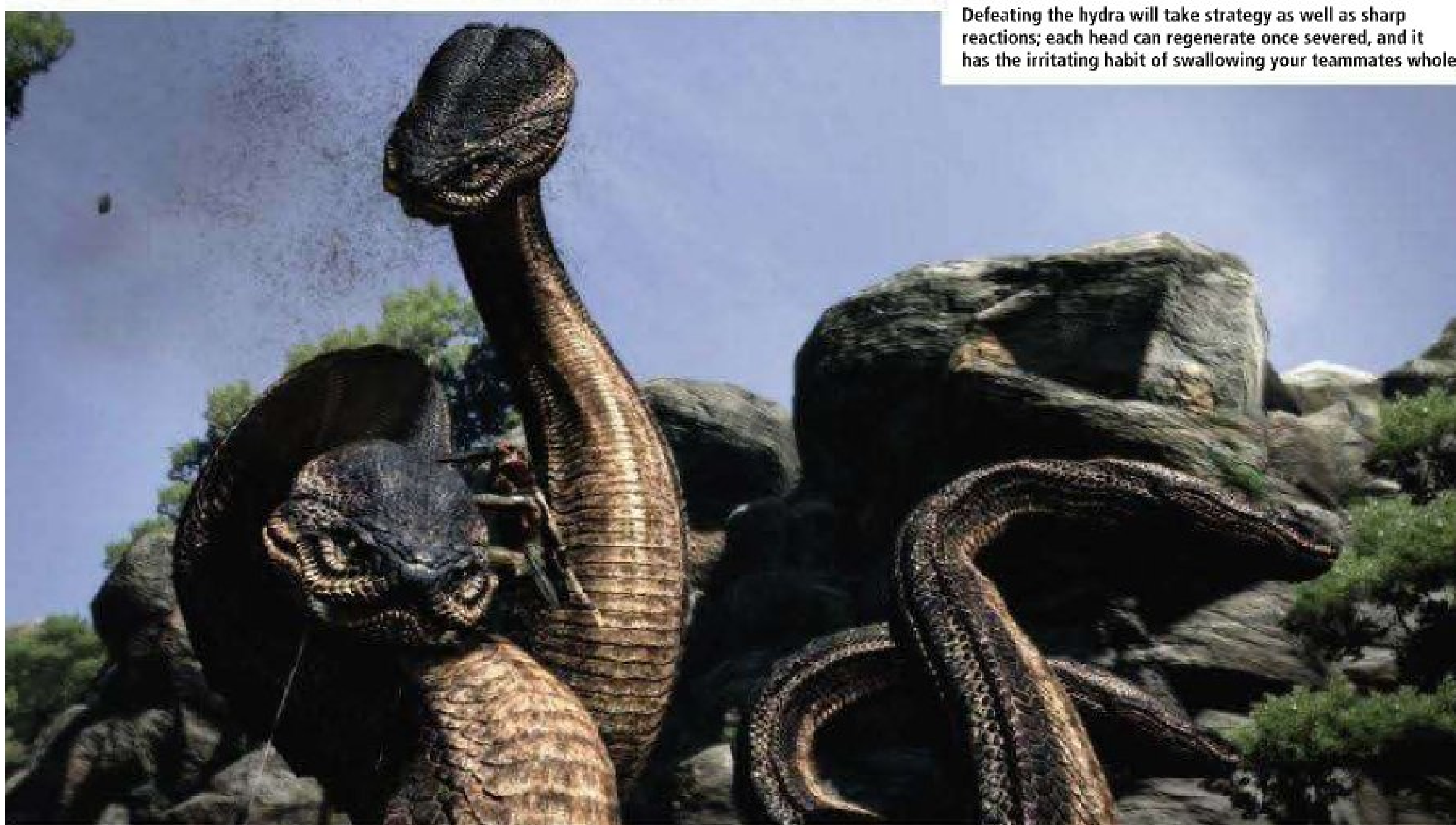




Goblins are as weak, numerous and annoying as usual. As your fully voiced AI companions often remind you, they also hate fire

Which isn't to suggest that some recognisable elements of the genre aren't present here – they're just presented in a way that enables immediate, functional heroism. Characters can be customised, allowing you to select gender and appearance, but you're limited to three classes. Like most high fantasy games, questing alone is tantamount to treason, so you're accompanied throughout the adventure by up to three AI companions that you select personally – either because of general fighting ability or an aptitude for a specific task. The most important element, however, is the open world. Instead of forcing you along the rigid narrative battlements of its previous action titles, Capcom is letting you play this game in whichever manner you choose. As Itsuno explains: "At Capcom we're not actually known for making open-world games, so this is a bit of a challenge for us, but we're excited by it."

> **Your first encounter with a group of goblins is interrupted by a griffin capable of scattering your party just by beating its huge wings – and this is one of the smaller creatures**



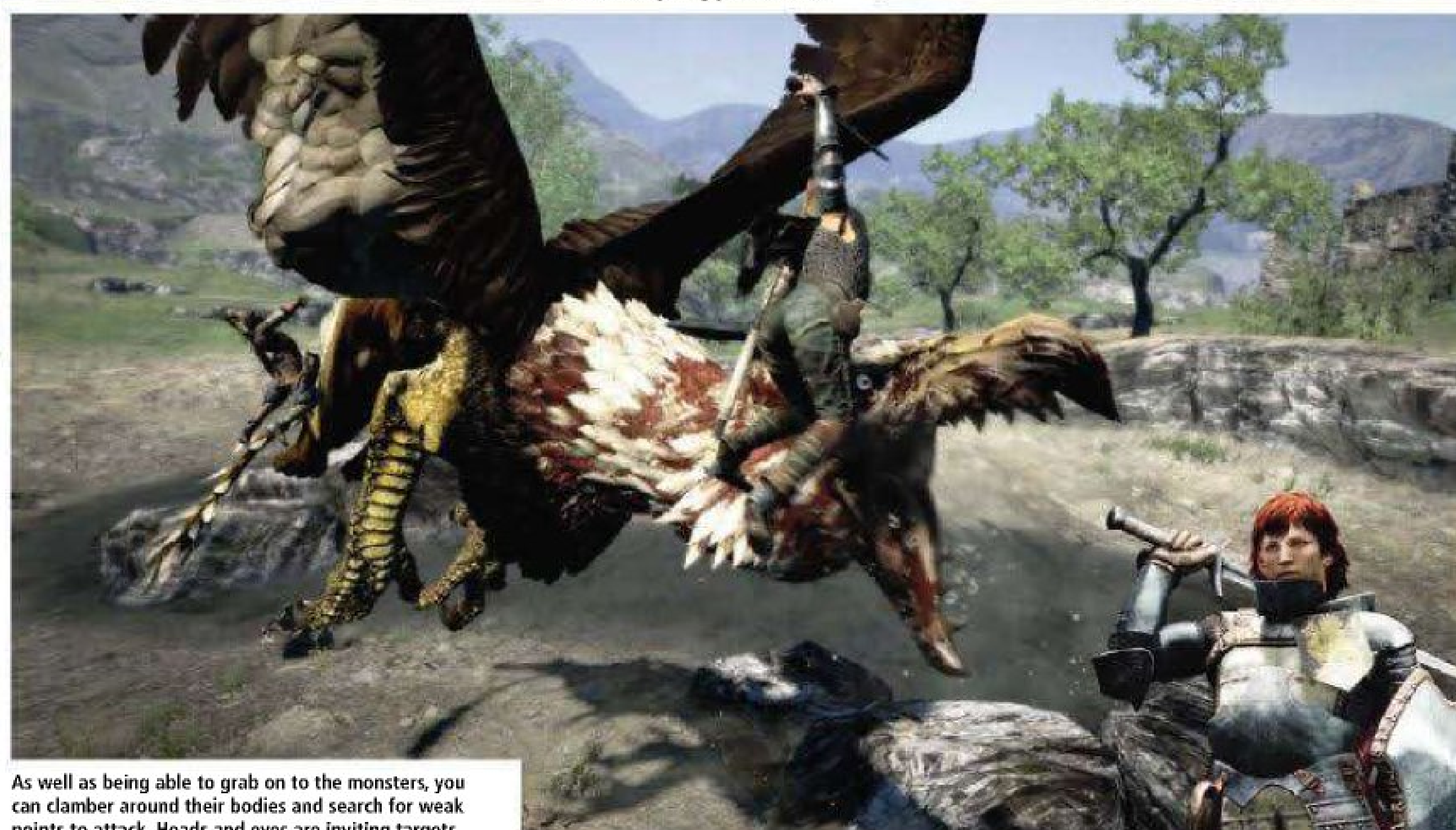
Defeating the hydra will take strategy as well as sharp reactions; each head can regenerate once severed, and it has the irritating habit of swallowing your teammates whole

In spite of this freedom, the emphasis is undoubtedly on combat rather than exploration, but the intention is to let you enjoy the experience on your own terms. "The reason we decided to go for the open world here is because we wanted to make you feel like you were living in this world, that things are happening all the time," Itsuno explains. "In the distance you might see a giant boss attacking a village, and if





This is the largest city in *Dragon's Dogma*, but expect a selection of settlements in the finished game. The open world means that you can visit anything you see here



As well as being able to grab on to the monsters, you can clamber around their bodies and search for weak points to attack. Heads and eyes are inviting targets

you see that, it's up to you if you want to go there, save those people and fight that boss." In practice, such feats are less heroic than they sound – few bards would melodically recount tales of a heraldic beast being dragged to the earth in a squawking mass of scorched feathers and flames. It feels gritty, punishing, real.

Real seems like an odd word to use in relation to a game so rooted in the fantastic, but according to the team the most important factor in creating a believable fantasy is that the recognisable elements seem tangible. There aren't any impractically huge axes here, or golden suits of armour. It's a dirty, medieval struggle for survival, and the goal of constructing believability extends to the finer details: cities are populated by voiced NPCs, each on a 24-hour cycle and a daily agenda, and the walled ramparts are grandiose without being impossibly over-the-top. Both Itsuno and producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi hope that the plausible setting will make the magical aspects of the game seem more credible.

That's not to suggest that the accompanying plot contains even the slightest semblance of sanity, though. The opening of the game has a dragon appearing from nowhere, causing havoc and literally stealing your heart. Thus begins a storyline in which your character has to track down the monster, retrieve your vital organ and investigate the changes in the land caused by its reappearance. The dogma referred to in the title relates directly to this quest – the dragon talks to you throughout the journey, acting as a teacher and guiding you towards an unknown purpose. Whatever the ultimate goal in *Dragon's Dogma*, the journey looks set to be an eventful one.

Class war

You're unlikely to hear the team at Capcom mention RPGs when discussing *Dragon's Dogma*, but the class system will certainly be familiar to fantasy fans. Players can choose from three classes – the Strider, presumably based on Lord of the Rings' Aragorn, who's capable of sustained ranged attacks and swift melee strikes; the mage, who can empower other players with magic and heal the team with area of effect spells; and the more traditional warrior, a no-frills fighting class. The team is intent that players care more about scrapping than stat-watching, so there'll be no magic bars – the longer you take to execute a spell, the more effective it is.



The mage can imbue your weapon with magic, allowing you to burn creatures with arrows or melee weapons. This works especially well against anything with feathers





FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS**
DEVELOPER: **ID SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E205, E217**

Rage

Tentacles on triggers for id's fast-paced shooter

It seems Bethesda is reluctant to release screenshots that show the game as you would see it, HUD and all – we see no particular reason to be shy about it, as the game is very pretty indeed apart from some occasional texture pop-in



Whatever else is said of post-apocalyptic shooter *Rage*, the guns feel good. How id Software fills that empty qualifier is a dark art, honed over the company's long history with the FPS. We ask creative director Tim Willits to spill id's weaponcraft secret. Is it the way Rage's thick-barrelled pistol bucks in your hand as you dispatch a mutant? Does it come down to the spurting wreck of limbs and gore under your crosshair? Or perhaps it's delivered in that sonic one-two of punchy bass and fricative hiss, as shot flares from barrel. Willits surprises us: it's all about latency – the time it takes for the game to react to a button-press – the barely perceptible milliseconds shaved off by extremely economical code. And *Rage* is certainly nothing if not responsive – during our dash through five high-energy missions, the framerate never dips below 60fps, the player bobbing through the post-apocalyptic wastes with a speedy fluency that recalls *Quake*.

The relentless pace of our playthrough, however, is something of misdirection – the full game encourages considerable downtime as you languorously explore its hubs, chat with the world's denizens and collect components with which to craft new kit. Our hands-on is wall-to-wall action, barrelling us through mutant lairs, bandit strongholds and fortified prisons. We're cast as a contestant in the sadistic Monster Bash TV show, and battle our way around a racetrack, turfing competing buggies into the sky with deftly aimed rockets. The combat scenarios do little to surprise on the whole – though the world of *Rage* offers non-linear exploration, many of its battles take place in controlled, linear environments built from the most familiar of components. At one point we kill someone on a turret and then, with galling inevitability, make use of it to take out incoming enemy reinforcements. But in id's hands even these well-worn set-pieces can be a thrill. The developer's traditional mastery of weaponcraft is paired with a more lurid range of gadgetry: head-severing 'wingsticks', radio-controlled car bombs, deployable turrets and spider-bots – robotic allies that somehow remain characterful and cute even when impaling bandits on their talons. Alternate bullet-types allow you to deliver an immobilising shock to heavier enemies while you polish off their punier allies. None of these tricks are especially novel – RC bombs nod to *GTA*, while *Half-Life 2* and *BioShock* can lay claim to some of the blueprints for *Rage*'s other toys. But in combination here they add a variety to combat that allows players to impart their own character upon any situation – making each battle a bloody sandbox.

> We kill someone on a turret and then, with galling inevitability, use it to take out enemy reinforcements. But in id's hands even these well-worn set-pieces can be a thrill

Enemies are a varied bunch too, although they fall into traditional archetypes. Mutants close quickly and are deadly in packs but otherwise fall easily; human opponents are more circumspect, chipping away at you from cover while others move in to press your position – particularly evident with bandit clan the Shroud, who deploy heavies which can soak up tons of damage before succumbing. Tech-heavy oppressors the Authority, meanwhile, make smart use of health-replenishing recharge stations and combat shields to really put the screws on you. Mini-bosses are also thrown into the mix – some muties lob Molotovs, while a tentacle-armed monstrosity charges and slashes at you. An ample supply of components permitting, it's often wise to anticipate such triggered defence sequences with a perimeter of turret guns.

It's a breathless mix of challenges, certainly, but there are occasionally stutters. Despite the player's rapid movement speed, environments don't feel as elegantly navigable as they might, the game's linearity underlined by invisible walls that stumble the player's feet and cut off what at first glance appear to be shortcuts. We spent some time trying to jump through an invisible wall to the next section of a level before an id staffer politely informed us we had to build a lock-drill to get through a nearby door. In fact, the act of building items itself also seems like a slightly awkward



We're pleased to hear *Quake*'s announcer is making a return for Combat Rally – but apparently he may yet be replaced





Switching between weapons and gadgets isn't as fluid as you might like. The right bumper currently brings up a selection screen, freezing you but not the gameworld, while the two analogue sticks select weapon and gadget



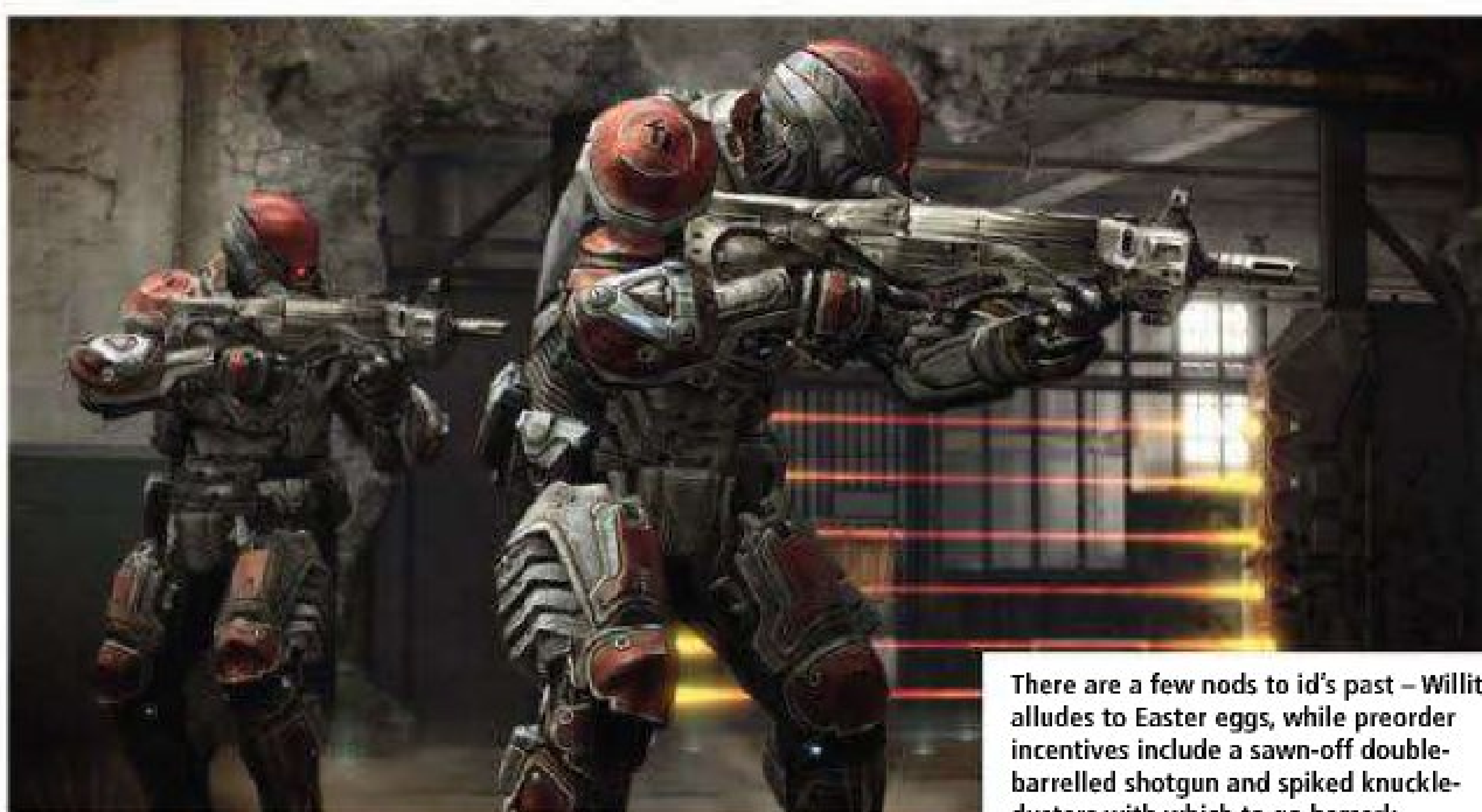
interjection in our breakneck demo – but it may feel more natural in the full game, where it encourages exploration and collection outside of the linear missions. Nonetheless, the need to collect components means that every battle ends with a protracted search of corpses and the nearby environment – and when so much can be collected, from ammo and machine parts to saleable junk like old bottles, you rapidly ignore the significance of each element. During our search of one room, for example, we didn't even notice we'd picked up a vital keycard along with ten other things.

The success of these RPG-tinged elements is dependent on how worthwhile the game's non-combat sequences feel – if they convince, the interruptions during combat will be transformed into world-building intricacy. No such adventures are playable in our demonstration, however, but a hands-off presentation showcases Subway Town, a late-game hub in which you work favours for the local big man in order to gain intelligence for a resistance movement. Entering the township feels much like *Fallout 3*, with the local populace suggesting sidequests to you, filling in background detail or offering minigames – we noted gambling with cards and a Simon-style note-repetition challenge. Though the character models themselves are designed with an eye for idiosyncratic detail, their facial animation feels, by today's high standards, stiff – necessitating exaggerated hand movements to convey emotion and intent. Id's representatives nonetheless make much talk of their intent to marry the developer's longstanding action heritage to a deeper, more emotionally diverse fiction. Its mastery of gunplay is a sure shot – but can *Rage* prove just as thrilling at peace?

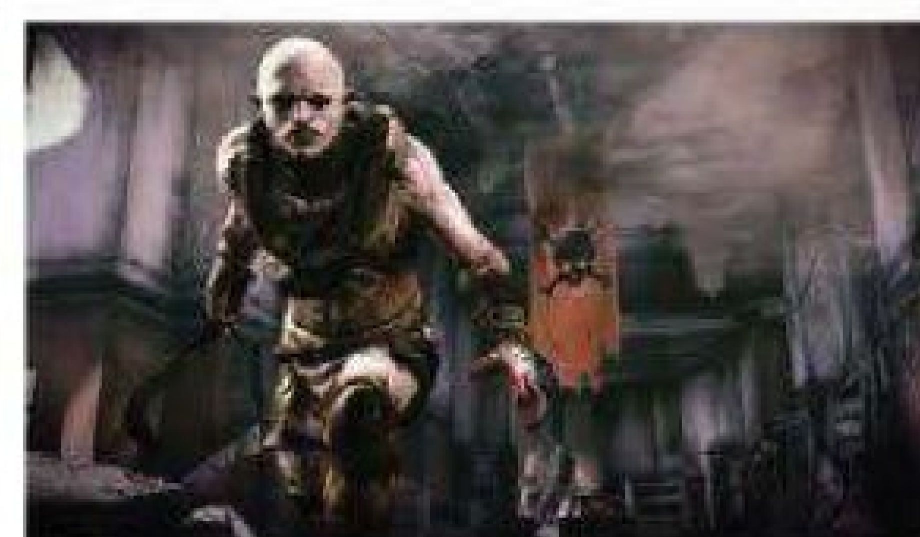


Carping DM

"What? No deathmatch?" has been the cry. Id practically invented it, after all. But the developer has stuck to its guns: there will be no means for friends to sling wingsticks through each other's necks. Instead, the online offering is twofold. First, there's Legends Of The Wasteland, a bespoke co-op campaign that retreads some of the singleplayer environs in other characters' shoes (Willits is keen to emphasise the support of splitscreen). Competitive players will have to be satisfied with Combat Rally – a vehicular brawl recalling *Twisted Metal* in which players blast the wheels from each other while racing to checkpoints to build their multiplier.



There are a few nods to id's past – Willits alludes to Easter eggs, while preorder incentives include a sawn-off double-barrelled shotgun and spiked knuckle-dusters with which to go berserk





FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **SLANT SIX GAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN/CANADA**
RELEASE: **WINTER**

Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City

Capcom's team shooter displays an unrecognisable strain of the T-Virus



To add to the carnage, famous Bio-Organic Weapons from the series infest each battle map, often requiring a team effort to eliminate. Luckily, the tougher BOWs like the hunter (above) will only attack stronger players



Zombies are little threat to the seasoned Umbrella operative, and can be employed as shields. They follow the scent of blood, so can also be used against opponents



The only time that *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City* producer **Masachika Kawata**'s aloof visage breaks is in response to a vanilla question from a journalist attending the game's official unveiling: "Is this game important to Capcom?" Unfazed, Kawata cracks into his only smile of the day and calmly explains exactly how crucial it is.

If this were another thirdperson adventure starring a member of the Redfield clan, then no journalist would have asked that question. But instead, it's a squad-based shooter, low on horror and high on controversy thanks to a marketing message that suggests you'll get to kill Leon Kennedy. More importantly, it's also the first *Resident Evil* title to be developed by a western studio. Kawata admits that *Operation Raccoon City* is capitalising partly on the increasing popularity in Japan of western shooters like *Call Of Duty*. "When you look at the Japanese market now, some of these more western games are starting to become more popular," he states. "I'm confident the game will attract quite a bit of attention in Japan."



Zombies spawn constantly in the levels, spilling out of doors and from behind corners. Environments aren't as overrun as in *Dead Rising*, but still bustle with undead

Seeing it in action, there's much about the game that feels worryingly unlike a *Resident Evil* title, but the setting is reassuringly familiar. It's staged during the events of the second game, with up to four players controlling members of the Umbrella Security Services, intent on eradicating the remaining police presence from a crumbling Raccoon City. It might not seem like the ideal construction for a story-driven *Resident Evil* game, but the campaign mode has a distinct narrative that sees you progressing through the city and, as the trailer suggests, eventually exchanging fire with some of the series' most famous faces. Kawata is clearly proud of the game's gore-flecked darkness – Capcom has spent a long time building Umbrella to be the ultimate corporate purveyor of evil, and it plans on letting you enjoy your brief spell of badness.

> Up to four players control members of the Umbrella Security Services, intent on eradicating the remaining police presence from a crumbling Raccoon City

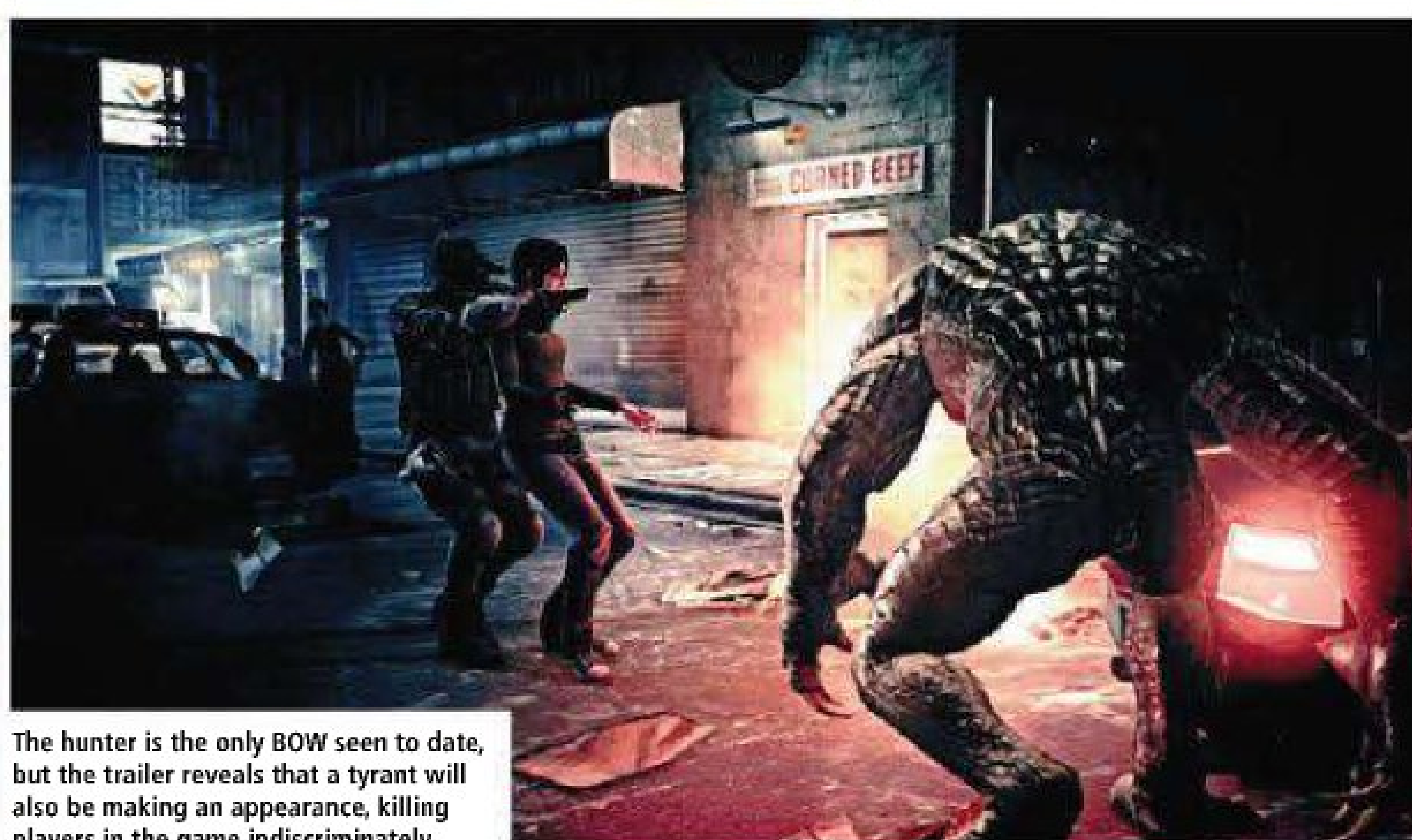
This pantomime villainy is clear in the characters you can choose from – all gas-masked, glistening and built for the kill. After being introduced to the first two – stealthy Vector and recon expert Spectre – there's a ripple of concern that they might all have rhyming names, like a murderous clown troupe. These fears are allayed by the entrance of Bertha, the medic and sole female of the group, and Beltway, a demolitions expert who currently holds the dubious accolade of weakest member of the team.

These are distinct characters, each with as much personality as it's possible to have beneath respirators. If you're playing the campaign in co-op you'll have to stick with your choice throughout, however, failing some post-mortem negotiations with squadmates. This limitation is also present



Plenty of famous *Resident Evil* faces are expected, but Leon Kennedy is the only one we've seen so far. Details of when and how you'll encounter him are still unknown





The hunter is the only BOW seen to date, but the trailer reveals that a tyrant will also be making an appearance, killing players in the game indiscriminately



The unlocking of mastery

The *Resident Evil* games have always rewarded extended play with unlockable treats, be it infinite rocket launchers or stylish (but often less protective) outfits. *Operation Raccoon City* looks set to continue this trend, but expect all the hidden extras here to be brutally functional. A standard set of weapons was available in the build we've seen, from hefty machine guns to light SMGs, and each standard weapon appears to be upgradeable. More interestingly, each character class will be able to unlock unique perks that will alter the way you play. There's space for nine perks per class, presumably of increasing effectiveness.

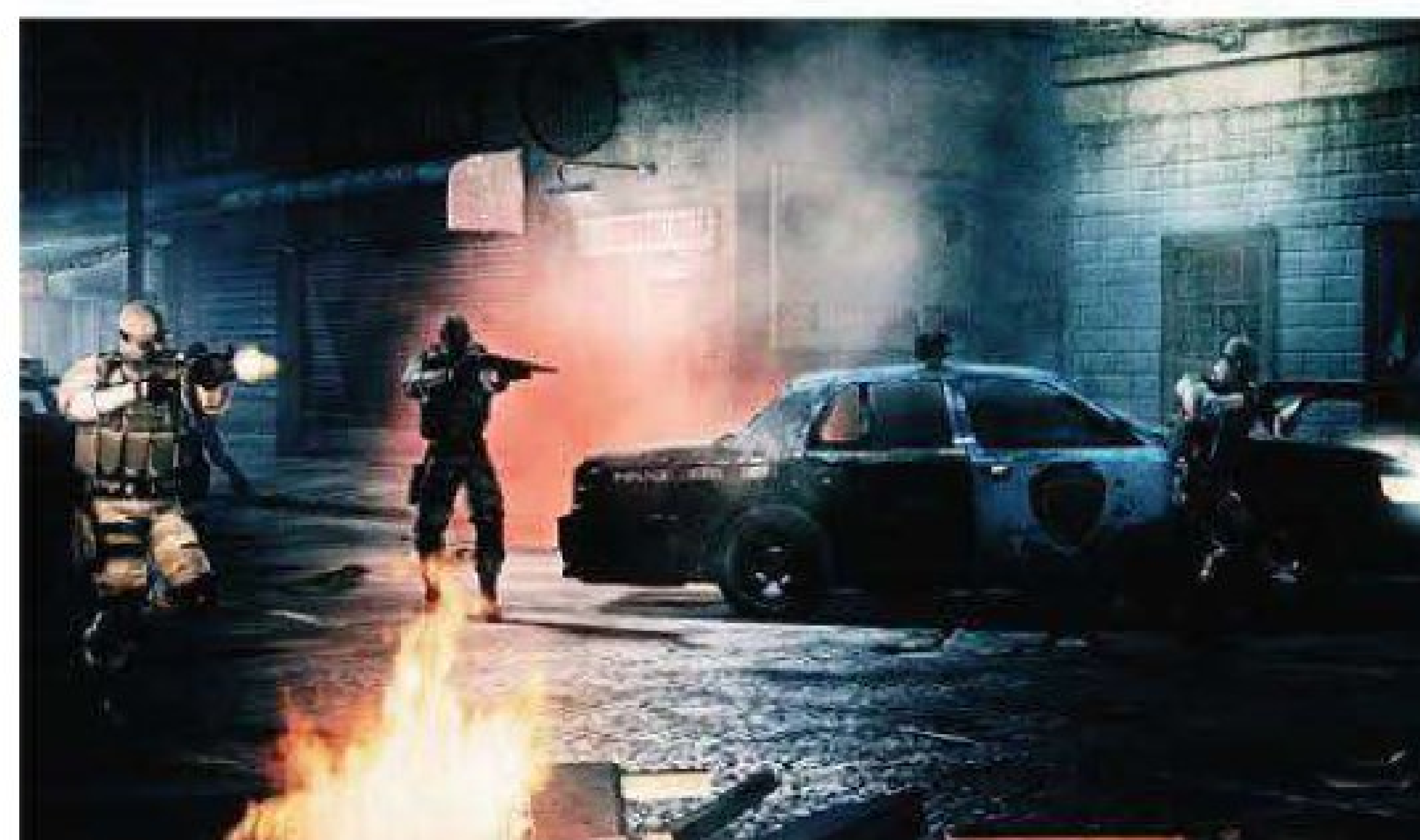
in the versus mode, which sees the Umbrella squad take on a US special forces team possessing precisely the same skills.

It's in the versus mode that the digression from the standard *Resident Evil* format becomes clearest. The goal is to track down and eliminate members of the opposing team in some of Raccoon City's most undesirable locations. Despite being full of shambling corpses, this is largely unrecognisable as a horror game. The undead are more of an inconvenience than a threat, to the point that they don't even appear on maps or in thermal vision – the latter being more understandable given their state of chilly undeath. Bio-Organic Weapons like the reptilian hunters add considerably more peril to the battlefield, but they're reduced from the stuff of bullet-diminishing nightmares to a functional threat.

More interesting is the balance of abilities. Stealth-based characters like Vector can equip the increasingly common active camouflage, enabling them to evade human enemies and strike opponents slyly. Even more entertaining is the mimicry talent, which disguises you as a fallen enemy for some deliciously villainous backstabbing. These abilities can be countered by recon classes, who can pick enemies out by using thermal and sonar tracking, setting up a militaristic game of chess between teams. Less useful is the destruction class, which is currently limited to dropping ineffectual mines around the urban wasteland. Unless the class is rebalanced, getting stuck with Beltway during a versus game will drastically reduce your chance of a competitive score. The medic feels more effective, thanks to an adrenaline boost that gives you an edge over the slower classes, but it's a drab skill compared to invisibility.

Ultimately, what we've seen so far poses more questions than answers. The game lacks the personality of previous *Resident Evil* titles, but a strong co-op campaign might resolve this. Moreover, underneath the troubled balancing issues of the versus mode, there's a tightly conceived shooter. The cackling malevolence promised by the trailer is largely absent, though; in fact, parts of *Operation Raccoon City* feel like a clinical exercise in amassing points and eliminating your enemies. Perhaps this is perfectly suited to a game in which you play as part of Umbrella – achieving your objectives with corporate coldness – but many will expect considerably more from Capcom's genetically superior franchise.





The levels do an effective, grimy job of recreating the carnage of *Resident Evil 2*. The many burnt-out cars can be used as cover against incoming fire, and maps are filled with the debris of a crumbling city

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E223**

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception

Naughty Dog's adventuring hero swaggers back on stage

The opening section of the Airstrip map takes place on a runway (top) where one team leaps between trucks to board the plane while the other defends the aircraft. Action then switches to an airport with a hangar and flight control tower where things get more traditional

The soundstage at Sony Pictures in Culver City, California, might look like an empty grey box, but it's actually home to ancient ruins, teeming jungles and the occasional rusted U-boat. It's here that Naughty Dog has built the performance-capture rig that powers the gripping, globe-spanning adventures of *Uncharted*, and right now hero Nathan Drake is driving a jeep made from a steering wheel and some tennis balls.

Or rather, **Nolan North** is driving the imaginary jeep, jimmied into a familiar second-skin body suit ("Custom made by the same guy who did the ones for Avatar") and playing out a scene with Richard McGonagle, better known as Drake's rascal mentor, Sully.

On the surface it looks indistinguishable from any motion-capture session for any game. And from a technical standpoint, this might be true. But the quality of performance and storytelling in the *Uncharted* series is unusually high, and there's a very good reason for this.

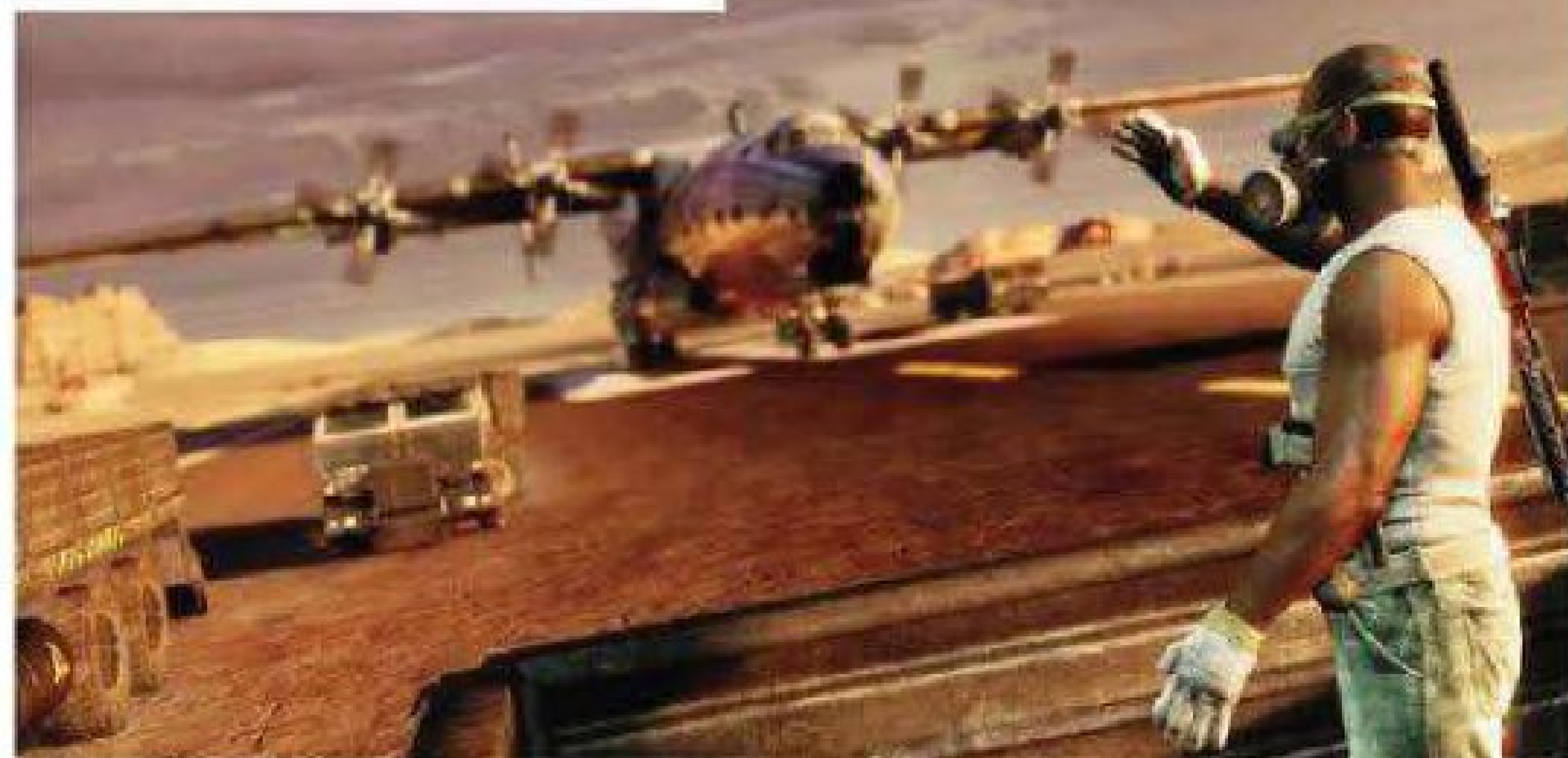
"You have to realise there's a certain amount of expense that goes along with



> "People are only going to buy 3D when there's awesome stuff in 3D. We're making the awesome stuff that'll drive people to adopt the technology"

this," says **Amy Hennig**, creative director at Naughty Dog. "Sony supports Naughty Dog wholeheartedly, both financially and creatively." Hennig points in particular to the time this support allows her to spend with the cast. "It's huge. This is a collaborative process that involves revision and improvement. Going through those drafts, having rehearsal time and table reads with the actors, letting them improvise and get to know their characters over a long period of time, it all contributes to raising the bar."

As well as the competitive multiplayer modes revealed already, *Uncharted 3* is confirmed to have co-operative play of some kind, too



From rehearsal to wrap, the performance capture takes a little over a year. When we visit the soundstage in April, the team has been meeting around twice a week since last June. "Our process is really more like being regulars on a television series than it is most games," says Hennig. "We have an outline we work from, and we write the scenes as we go. It gives us a lot of leverage if things have to be shrunk or moved. And the beauty for me as a writer is I get to know their voices, and I can write for them."

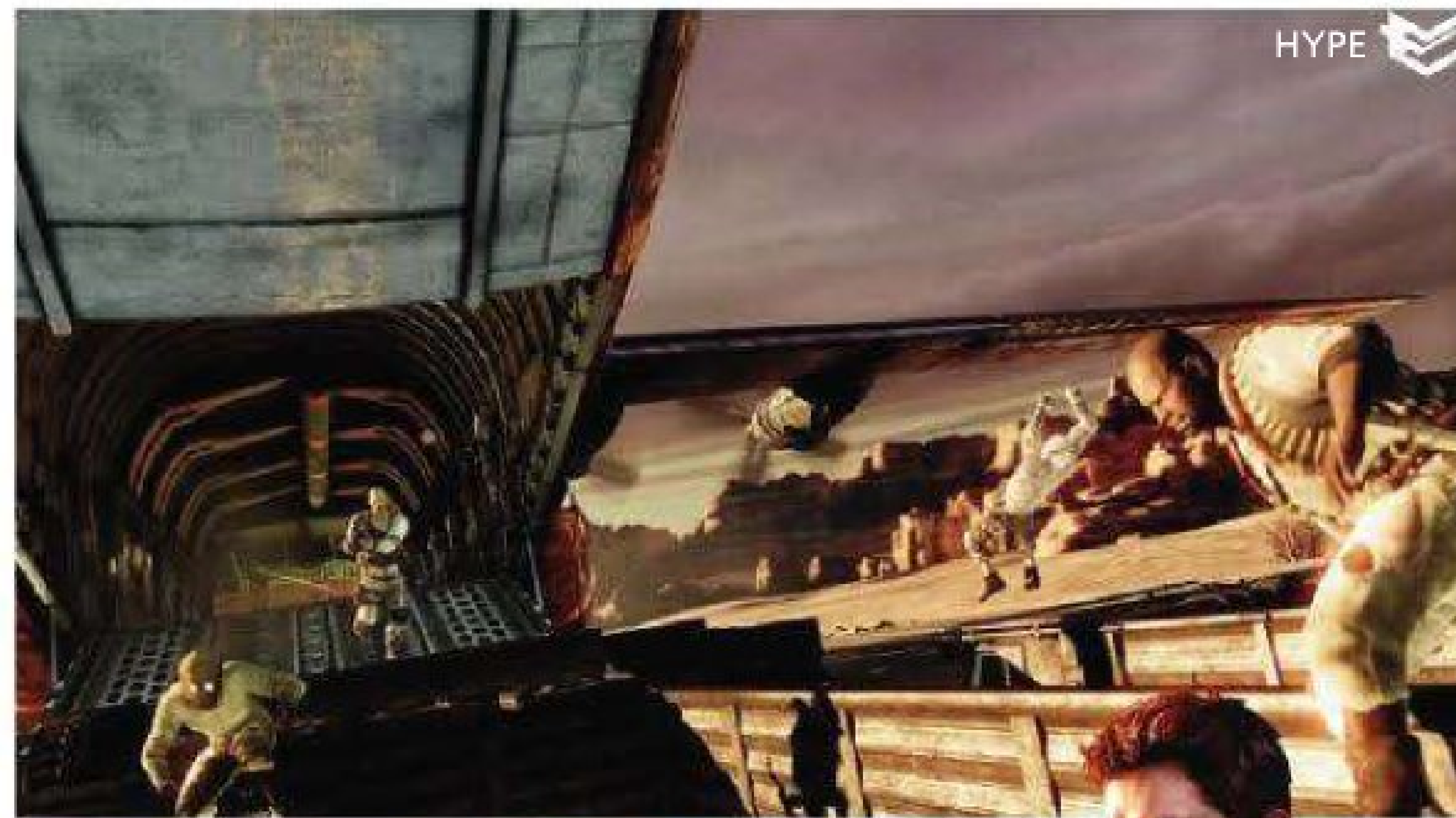
This certainly seems true of North, who shares an easy charm and stack of ready quips with his character ("I'm just acting 'til the bartending thing takes off," he says). After the first game the suits were redesigned with high-quality microphones, meaning the audio from the sessions could be used in-game, tightening the relationship between North and Drake. "We're in a transition phase now," says **Gordon Hunt**, the game's motion-capture and voice director, who heralds *Uncharted*'s sophisticated approach as a bigger step forward. He speaks as a Hollywood veteran, having worked in animation and TV for decades. "[It used to be] there was television and movies, and there were games. They were nice in their place and you'd pat them on the head. [But now] they're getting closer and closer, intermeshing as we sit here."

Another sign of this intermeshing, felt particularly keenly from our vantage point on the Sony Pictures soundstage, is the fact that *Uncharted 3* will be presented in 3D. No doubt Naughty Dog has been encouraged into the move as part of a wider strategy, but the game is nevertheless a natural fit for the technology. It's a world of ledges, tiered playgrounds and sharp drops, and in the singleplayer campaign, where Naughty Dog's designers have meticulously tweaked the convergence points for the game's cameras, the effect is inspired. "People are only going to buy 3D when there's awesome stuff in 3D," says lead designer **Jacob Minkoff**, brushing off concerns that 3D represents a large effort for a tiny target audience. "We're making the awesome stuff that'll drive people to adopt the technology."

In multiplayer the 3D is less fine-tuned –



The Airstrip level feels cinematic, while the Chateau (below) offers a more familiar playground-of-ruins feel, which lends itself to acrobatic clambering







Customisation plays a big part in multiplayer. Weapon loadouts can be tinkered with, and characters can be built from a good range of skin colours and features





undermined by both the frantic movement and the lack of controlled camera angles. But *Uncharted 3*'s online play, which retains the same basic shape as that of *Uncharted 2*, has other tricks, for the most part designed to heighten player engagement during matches. One innovation is called the power play, a rubber-banding mechanism to boost teams receiving a heavy hammering. "It won't mean that weak teams can beat strong ones," says **Justin Richmond**, the game's director, "it'll just keep things interesting for everybody." Whether that will mollify PSN bully boys remains to be seen, but at least these power plays are fun. One disguises all players – on both sides – as identical skeletons in the eyes of the winning team, making it impossible to identify the enemy; another lights up opponents so their position is visible to the straggling side. In every match we played, the dominant team won despite the handicap, but the subtle, temporary shifts in focus and objectives keep one-sided battles from becoming a massacre.

Another method of drawing player focus is through the new buddy system. It might sound like a step too close to *Army Of Two*'s fratboy headbutting (high-fives are involved) but this is in fact a soft-handed incentive mechanism to keep players working together. Downed players are given the choice to spawn beside their assigned buddy (usually a lobby friend, unless you're fighting solo), and there are damage and XP bonuses for using the same weapon and firing at a joint target. It's unobtrusive and, with the spawn option making locating your pal a breeze, doesn't rely on voice chat. It's particularly crucial to the game's new two-on-two-on-two battles, which are frantic and in which the buddy damage bonus can mean the difference between a win and a loss.

Other additions fall into the shiny bells-and-whistles category. The cinema replay mode is more sophisticated and allows for in-game editing, while 'Uncharted TV' streams uploaded highlights in between rounds. And, in sharp contrast to the invite clumsiness found in too many PS3 titles, *Uncharted 3* features an integrated Facebook sign-in which enables players to see and connect with Facebook friends regardless of whether they're friends on PSN.

It's an ambitious set of features, and with an expanded cooperative mode still to be formally announced, feature creep and a too-thin spread of resources might normally be a concern. But Naughty Dog's pursuit of quality is seemingly relentless, the team is clearly highly motivated and focused, and – if Sony continues to write the cheques – there's every reason to believe *Uncharted 3* will be another milestone.

Drake's adaptation

Work continues on the Uncharted movie, directed by David O Russell and starring Mark Wahlberg. Fan reaction to the project has been mostly negative, while the mood at Naughty Dog ranges from positive to accepting. "We've been working really closely with David O Russell; he's been to our office," says Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells. "We're really excited to see where he takes it." Hennig respects the fact that Russell's job is to make a successful film above all else. "We're waiting too," she says, "but if the guy who made Three Kings wants to make an *Uncharted* movie, we should be thankful, right?" North is more philosophical: "Is it difficult, is it strange? Yeah. But that's the business of making big movies – you need big stars. I'm very protective of what *we* do. If that ever infringed on what we do well, I'm burning someone's house down."









Having a bulkier frame comes in useful, and means that West can carry out more physical moves than Chuck Greene, including this WWE-style body press attack. The foam hand is just for show

Dead Rising 2: Off The Record

Frank West is back on the case – beefier and brasher than ever

FORMATS: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM VANCOUVER**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

In just 30 seconds of *Off The Record*, we've seen Frank West photograph a bomb plot, a pile of bloodied saw blades, a sleazy poster of a showgirl and a concealed stash of unspeakable adult toys. Just when you begin to imagine that things couldn't be any more ridiculous, the original *Dead Rising* star grasps a nearby zombie and takes a self-portrait of him embracing his new undead friend. It's puerile and hilarious.

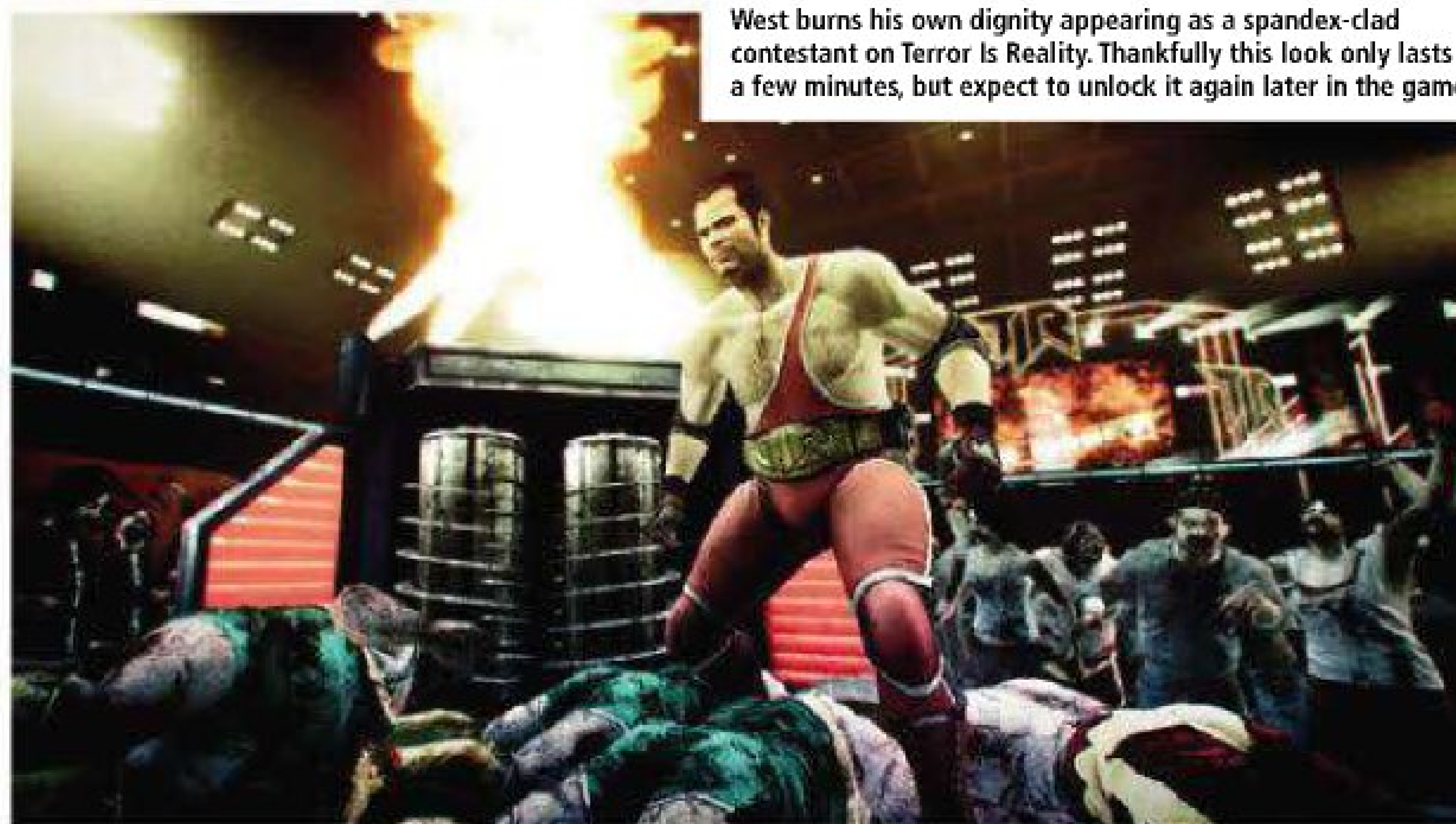
Initially, there seems little about *Off The Record* to make headlines. It's essentially a reimagining of the events of *Dead Rising 2* with the first game's star, Frank West, in the main role – something fans of the series asked for from the beginning. It's a pleasure seeing West in action again, especially with his experience-point-earning photography skills fully restored. We may have learned to love his replacement, Chuck Greene, but it's West's sneering indifference we imagine when watching zombies stumbling around in Servbot heads.

The story begins with West facing the undead hordes as a means of earning money – he's currently infected with the parasite, and needs the cash to pay for the expensive Zombrex treatment. He's experienced fame following the event of the first *Dead Rising* – even securing his own talk show and a book deal – but along with his infection he's also suffered a breakdown that's led to him taking part in zombie-baiting gameshow Terror Is Reality. It's here that he discovers the conspiracy from the second game, becoming embroiled in the plot that originally involved scowling motocross champion Greene. Everything will be retold from West's uniquely cocky viewpoint, meaning that you'll experience different relationships with established characters – for example, West revealed in DLC chapter Case West that he previously knew Greene's reporter ally Rebecca Chang, so any interaction in *Off The Record* will be from a different perspective.

It's not just the storyline that's been altered, however. An entirely new, as-yet-unannounced area will be featured in the game – and Capcom has confirmed that it won't be a casino or mall. Moreover, players can expect to encounter new psychopaths – often the most intriguing and frustrating element of the series. Chuck Greene's skill at creating combo weapons was touted as a replacement for the lack of photography in *Dead Rising 2*, but West retains the ability to make lethal things happen just by duct-taping a battery pack to a wheelchair.

Capcom Vancouver cites fans' reactions to *Dead Rising 2* as an inspiration for this additional full release, and it supports this assertion by implementing some long-requested gameplay improvements, not least of which is a checkpoint system. Finally, unexpected deaths at the frying-pan-wielding hands of a psychotic chef won't result in you losing hours of play. It might not be enough to convert gamers who've never understood the appeal of the flawed but frequently entertaining zombie apocalypse simulator, but fans of the series will be glad to have West back. 





West burns his own dignity appearing as a spandex-clad contestant on Terror Is Reality. Thankfully this look only lasts a few minutes, but expect to unlock it again later in the game



He's covered wars, y'know

Anyone who missed the first *Dead Rising* will be unfamiliar with West's unique set of skills: he's part photojournalist, part professional wrestler. Where the first game had you slowly building your abilities, from area-clearing spinning lariats to cranium-breaking suplexes, West hasn't forgotten any of his old tricks. These are especially useful during the opening section of the game, which has you brawling bare-fisted against zombies during a humiliating spell on Terror Is Reality. This isn't to suggest that West won't have access to plenty of weapons, though – *Off The Record* will feature an even bigger selection than *Dead Rising 2*.



Street Fighter X Tekken

Round one of gaming's greatest crossover, and the competitors are looking evenly matched

It's easy to see why *Street Fighter X Tekken* producer Yoshinori Ono is so enthusiastic about his work. When Kazuya Mishima smashes Ryu with a combo he's been using since the beginning of the *Tekken* series, there's still a fleeting moment where this all feels too outlandish to be true. But it's actually happening, and it's all thanks to Korean barbecue.

Seizing on the resurgent popularity of fighting games, Ono and *Tekken* creator Katsuhiro Harada went to dinner and decided to combine franchises over another shared love – grilled meat. Bearing in mind the huge differences in game mechanics, they decided to make two distinct titles. The Namco release, *Tekken X Street Fighter*, might be the more troublesome of the two games to imagine, but the latest entry in Capcom's premier fighting series plays exactly as you'd expect – albeit with a tag-team mechanic that owes more to Namco than Capcom. It's always been a series built around defence and counterattacks, about reading your opponent and knowing when and how to apply pressure. Considering that the *Tekken* characters have typically been more comfortable handing out a deluge of attacks, their conversion was always going to be a tantalising prospect.

As if to allay any fears about how *Tekken's* fireball-free characters will be able to face up to *Street Fighter's* projectile-heavy cast, the current build of the game contains the likes of Ryu and Ken, and rangy, defensive characters such as Guile; if the *Tekken* crew can deal with these, then any balance issues can be all but forgotten. Pleasingly, the grounded, close-quarter fighters seem to be having few problems. Nina Williams has some swift, punishing high-low combos and can close distance quickly with dash moves, as can burly Marduk; he's also able to follow up combos with what looks to be one of the fastest tackles in the game. Veterans will be quick enough to read and avoid it, but it'll undoubtedly cause problems for some. Wrestler King retains the snappy dropkicks and chain throws he's famous for, but at present some of his close-quarter moves don't feel as effective as they should; one fudged throw here perhaps isn't as fatal as in *Tekken*, but it's damaging nonetheless.

Freestyle karate practitioner Bob seems less interesting without *Street Fighter's* similarly rotund Rufus to spar with, but Kazuya is already looking like many players' first pick. His spinning demon sweep combo can be chained together with a tag manoeuvre, allowing your second team member to dash in mid-kick and deal additional damage. The *Street Fighter* characters on offer – Ryu, Ken, Guile, Chun-Li and Abel – don't look drastically different, except for the addition of moves that all the characters are capable of. Everyone now has access to a launcher triggered by hitting both heavy attacks simultaneously; a familiar idea, but one that will take time to get used to. The tag system – activated by pressing both medium attacks together – flows elegantly into combos and does nothing to detract from *SFIV's* system.

It could be argued that the *Street Fighter* environment is more welcoming to new characters, with fewer dimensions and more linear attack patterns, but balance and collision detection are still important. Fortunately, none of the *Tekken* migrants seem out of place here, and *Street Fighter X Tekken* looks set to be far more than just a franchise-swapping novelty. Another reason to love Korean barbecue.





The impact of some of the bigger *Tekken* attacks and combos feels more tangible than ever here, thanks to the cartoonish reactions of the characters enabled by Daigo Ikeno's remarkable animated art style





Stages are filled with the typical level of Capcom detail, with nods to other classic series. *Tekken's* boxing velociraptor Alex is even hiding in the background

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2012**



Art of fighting

Since *Street Fighter III*, the most visually arresting elements of that series have often been the Super Art moves. It's no different in *SFXT*, and they feel more satisfying than ever when performed with the *Tekken* characters. For example, Kazuya Mishima's Super Art is a combination of his most recognisable attacks, including a lightning screw godfist – essentially a massive, twisting uppercut – which he follows by searing his airborne opponent with a devilish eye blast. This can be executed by filling up a gauge and performing the move with all three punch buttons, or by holding a single button for a prolonged period of time. Just don't try the latter method against anyone who knows what they're doing.



There's an option to use a standard controller for the game, but it's Kinect that makes you truly feel a part of Eden's world. It remains to be seen how well Move support gels with your onscreen exploits



Perhaps more than any other game of its generation, *Child Of Eden* cries out for a high-end sound system and the biggest screen you can get your hands on

Child Of Eden

We ride the crest of Mizuguchi's soundwave in his entrancing opus



Sitting, or in the case of Kinect standing, in front of a near-complete build of Tetsuya Mizuguchi's psychedelic on-rails shooter, the objective of the game is more pronounced, the message more serious: save Eden. Save Lumi.

Lumi herself – a virtual recreation of the first space-born child – appears in an opening cinematic that combines live action and CG in a dazzling summary of the game's wafer-thin narrative. Lumi, trapped inside the increasingly virus-ridden world of Eden – Mizuguchi's impressionistic vision of the internet's inner life – needs rescuing.

The damsel in distress is also suspended in the level-select screen, called the Archive, which is at once mesmerising, hypnotic and confusing. Otherworldly creatures and obscure imagery float, pulsate and react to your hand movements as you select your stage. Even in these early moments, *Child Of Eden*'s atmosphere is as affecting as its designs are abstract. It is both pleasant and foreboding, with an overriding sense of the ethereal.

The tutorial mode, called Matrix, teaches you the basics: one hand highlights enemies and a simple motion towards the screen then emits a laser shot at whatever's locked to your sights. The other hand fires a Tracer, a barrage of less-powerful shots to get you out of sticky situations and your only way of destroying incoming bullets and purple-coloured foes. A collectable special attack, Euphoria, is activated by throwing both arms in the air to initiate a screen-clearing projectile flurry. A life gauge in the bottom right of the screen is one of just a few reminders that this is, in fact, a game with rules and objectives, not just a transfixing tunnel of techno dreams.

The wireframes and popping pixel stardust of Matrix are an obvious nod to *Rez*, though other levels, such as Beauty, provide a much more original and captivating vista to purify (see 'Worlds apart'). The Evolution stage at times feels more like the interactive world of *Electroplankton* – a soundscape tied tightly to the activity and changes in the enemy patterns and scenery. It underscores how directly the game's flow is connected to its layered audio design.

Though navigation is on rails, there's a surprising amount of freedom to manoeuvre the camera. Pushing your crosshair toward the edges of the screen moves your field of view, allowing you to collect every pickup and achieve multiple lock-ons to improve your high score. The firstperson perspective offers a far greater sense of immersion than *Rez*'s thirdperson life form, adding a sense of vertigo to steep drops and devoting as much screen space as possible to the assault of sight and sound. When you're in the game's foot-tapping rhythm, with vocals and beats building to a crescendo as your hands conduct the onscreen action, you feel like some electric god, the saviour of Eden's universe.

As with *Rez* before it, the genius of *Child Of Eden* is that – as with Lumi herself – it's a pure, simple creature trapped in an overwhelming and unpredictable world. The game may not initially have been designed for motion control, but there's no denying that Kinect was made for experiences like *Child Of Eden*.



Highlighting purple enemies with one hand before delivering the killing blow with the other gives *Child Of Eden* the ebb and flow of a boxing match at times



The firstperson view provides a genuine sense of submersion in *Child Of Eden*'s weird, wonderful and wild worlds. Pressing Start on the level-select screen to pick a stage is appropriately referred to as a 'Dive'

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE 17**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E221**



Worlds apart

Each level has its own theme and unique feel. The pacing and iconography of Beauty, with its nature-based designs and tranquil, flowing waters, are in stark contrast to the industrial, mechanical world of Passion. The latter is a level filled with cogs and machinery, and is without doubt the highlight of the levels we've sampled. Each of its phases is broken up by a sequence in which two atom-like orbs battle it out, eventually exploding to create the next section of the world. As with most of the game's unforgettable realms, it has to be seen to be believed.

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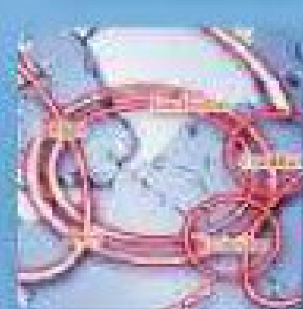
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FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CYBER CONNECT 2
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: 2012

Asura's Wrath

Gargantuan action that's shaking six fists at the heavens





This QTE has you inputting every blow to fend off the finger of a colossal demigod. Failure surely ends in crushing







This early boss battle is split into sections, including a breathless sprint during which you have to repel waves of incoming missiles

It's been said that a man is only as big as the things that make him angry. If that's true, then the hero of *Asura's Wrath* is massive, if only because the thing currently increasing his blood pressure is a demigod large enough to dwarf most moons.

Anyone paying attention will have noted the 'demi' in the previous sentence; despite the fact that this colossal deity peers down on Earth from space, and is capable of crushing Asura with a single finger, he's actually one of the lesser gods you'll face in Capcom's frantic, gnashing new brawler. It's also one of the earliest boss battles in the game – a terrifying and exhilarating thought, since many developers would save a set-piece of this magnitude until the dying moments of a title.

This isn't just about directionless rage, though. Judging from what we've seen, Asura has plenty to be upset about: he's been stripped of his powers by his fellow gods and banished to Earth. If this wasn't infuriating enough, they've also kidnapped his daughter. It's the anger caused by this that drives Asura and makes him capable of dealing with such enormous challenges. Pummelling him into the ground with an unstoppable god-finger is a mere annoyance, and the more furious he gets, the more dangerous he becomes. As producer **Kazuhiro Tsuchiya** notes, this is what makes Asura more resilient than the most leathery of ageing rock bands. "When Asura is pushed to the edge he gets really angry and his true power swells out of him," he explains. "It's because of this that he's able to overcome and turn the tables on these enemies."

We've seen glimpses of what a more enraged Asura is capable in some QTE-heavy boss battles (see 'Quick-tempered events').

According to Tsuchiya, this is merely the tip of a consistently surprising iceberg. There's a strong emphasis on the narrative in what initially looked like little more than a tempestuous scrapper, and the team is intent on balancing the drama of the storyline – presumably including Asura's eventual revenge – with a crisply paced action game.

The focus on that one all-pervading emotion also carries over into the art design. There's a frantic scratchiness to the visuals, and the bizarre mix of nameless eastern mythology and science-fiction melds together to make something unique. "Asura's wildness, his anger, his ferocity – all that needed to be shown in the art style," explains Tsuchiya. Asura is essentially the personification of wrath, and the blistering, abrasive design conveys this well.

It's hard to tell at this stage whether the delirious glimpses we've seen of *Asura's Wrath* will translate into something genuinely thrilling, but there's plenty here that's intriguing. If nothing else, the level of passion Cyber Connect 2 has for the project is enough to make even its frenzied protagonist think kindly thoughts.

Quick-tempered events

QTE sections in action games can often inspire tired indifference, but *Asura's Wrath* looks to be implementing them in a manner that demands your full attention. For bigger battles, even stamping Asura's feet into the earth is done with a press of the corresponding trigger, and the relentless flurry of blows that follows is controlled by a furious hammering of buttons. The intention is to make the player feel in control throughout, but each battle feels distinct and memorable. Moreover, the action sequences fit seamlessly with the epic fights, ensuring Asura's journey of revenge flows without interruption.





Every action in this event is controlled by the player. You've got less control than in a standard action sequence, but you don't just sit back and watch









Warzones are frantic, with no one-hit kills – at least, by default. Hopefully PVP gear won't unbalance this too much, or will be taken into consideration during matchmaking. There's little worse, especially as a DPS player, than constantly being taken out with no warning

Star Wars: The Old Republic

If you want to make the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs, this might be the MMOG you're looking for

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2011**





Jedi vs Sith

***The Old Republic*'s PVP mode is objective based, the mission we've played involving controlling turrets to take out the opposition's spaceship above Alderaan. What makes it interesting is that (playing as Level 20 characters without high-end gear) attacks aren't very powerful, turning battles into proper duels instead of one-hit kills. This works especially well when a Jedi or Sith faces his opposite number, spitting Force attacks and leaping, sabre blazing, to glory.**

According to BioWare, *The Old Republic* is both an epic MMOG in its own right and *Knights Of The Old Republic III*, *IV* and *V*. Want crafting, PVP, dungeons and so on? Step through the door on the left. Prefer a class-focused storyline that sends you all around the galaxy on behalf of the Republic or Sith? Head right.

There's a problem, though. Playing through the opening levels, it quickly becomes clear that these are two very different RPG templates largely forced together, which chafe every bit as much as they offer the best of both worlds.

Take a standard quest in *KOTOR*. You'd be sent to Place A to do Thing B, and return. Same here. Since *TOR* is an MMOG, though, Thing B – by unwritten law – will consist of killing ten monsters, or finding four shinies or some equally padded-out nonsense. Flip to the MMOG side, and every character class having a unique campaign suddenly means that there's a limit to how much you can quest with other players. If you sidekick for a friend, for instance, you'll miss out on your own story. If not, you'll likely be separated later as your narratives diverge. This may not be a game-breaker, but still leaves *TOR* looking very uncomfortable in its expensively stitched-together skin.

Approached as a singleplayer experience, the narrative side works well. Controlling an Imperial Agent, we masquerade as a feared pirate to destabilise the Hutt homeworld, with no shortage of intrigue and moral choices to make. BioWare promises that decisions big and small will ripple through every class storyline, with at least one big branch of character development based on karma. You can be a jerk of a Jedi, a smuggler with a heart of gold or prove that working for the official baddies doesn't mean you have to be a puppy-kicking monster. Compassion and mercy are often presented as options, as is talking your way out, allowing you to play an honourable spy in a corrupt system.

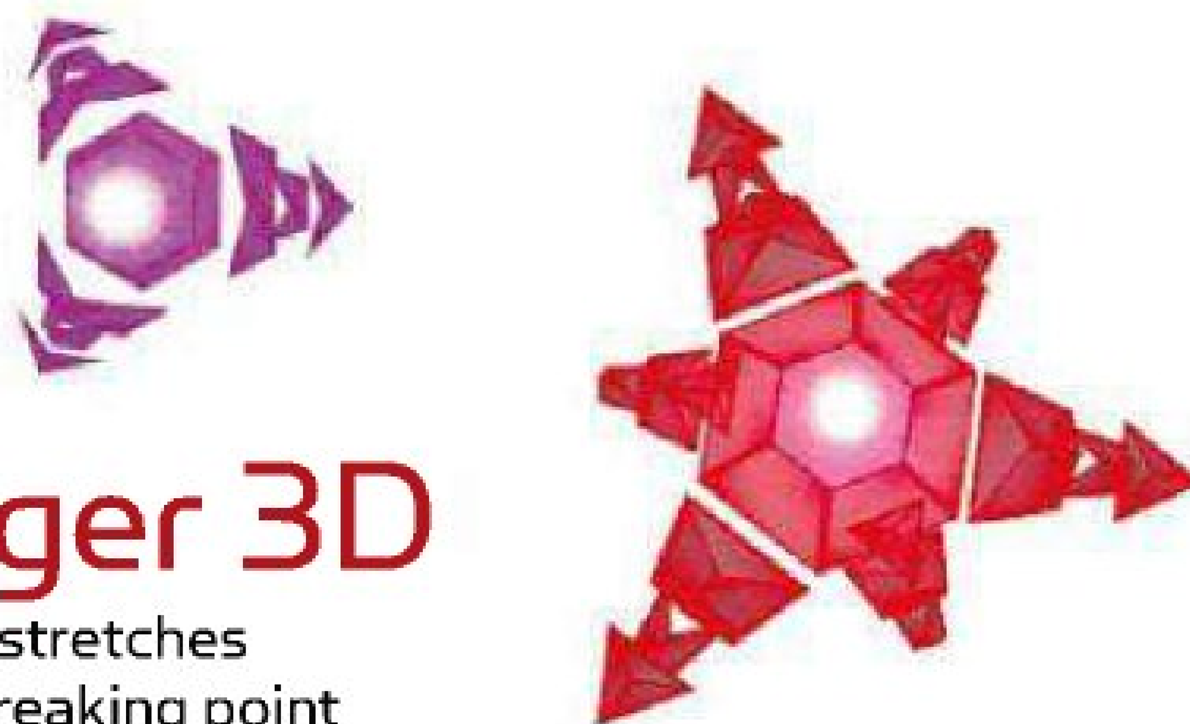
When fighting inevitably breaks out, MMOG rules apply. The Agent is a cover-based class, ducking behind scenery or slapping down portable field generators for added protection. As with much of the MMOG side, it proves entertaining, but not exceptional. The two other classes we try offer a more mixed experience. The Bounty Hunter, whatever the stats behind his weapons, makes being armed with a jetpack, flamethrower and missile launcher feel weak. There's no subtlety to his moveset, making every fight feel like a grind, and his one interesting move (leaping into the air and raining missiles down on enemies) quickly loses its appeal. Taking control of a dual Lightsaber-wielding, Force-choking Sith, on the other hand, feels exactly right, if not ultra-powerful due to the needs of game balancing.

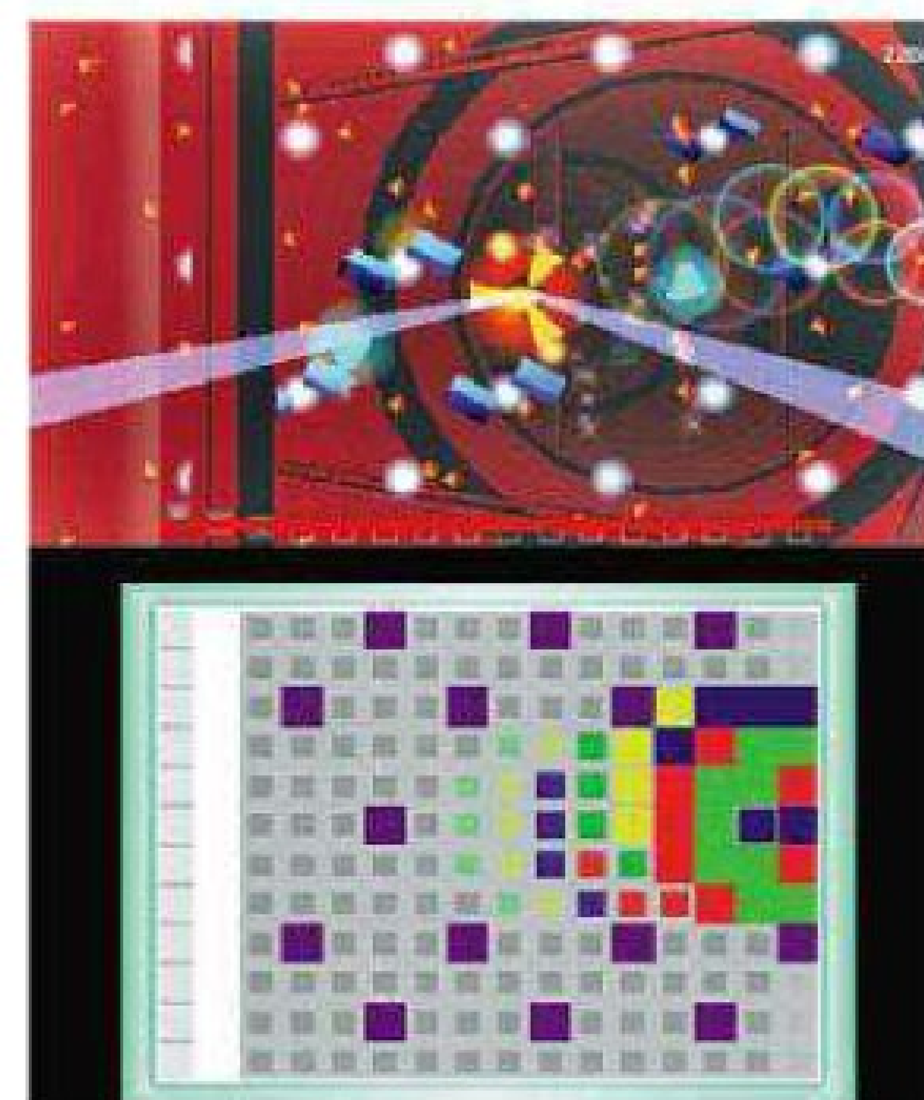
In these moments, with orchestral music booming and a whole galaxy to explore, *TOR* suddenly becomes a far more engaging prospect. Good enough? We hope so. But not to the point that we're giving up on one day seeing a real *KOTOR III*, *IV* and *V*, or of future big MMOGs being more willing to throw out the rulebook instead of simply bolting on a few extra, if incredibly welcome, new chapters.



All quests are delivered through fully voiced, animated cutscenes. In an obvious adoption of one of BioWare's more successful singleplayer mechanics, the player character talks too, his or her choices handled via a dialogue wheel

FORMAT: **3DS**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER (US), NAMCO (EU)**
DEVELOPER: **ART CO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**





Every level ends with a boss that is less a challenge to conquer and more an excuse to multiply your score – stylus swipes on the bosses will charge your laser, but they move in and out of vulnerability and invulnerability

Dream Trigger 3D

Art Co's bullet-hell shooter stretches hand-eye coordination to breaking point

The bullet-hell equivalent of trying to pat your head with one hand and rub your belly with the other, *Dream Trigger 3D* is built around a deliberately unintuitive separation of the action on the twin 3DS screens. On the top screen, an endless horde of indestructible abstract enemies winks into existence. On the lower screen sits a grid of panels that correspond directly with the screen above – swipe the right place on the touchscreen and not only will enemies become vulnerable, but your ship's laser gets charged as well.

The fiendishness of the setup soon becomes apparent. Enemies, and their accompanying bullets, appear and move at speeds that make taking your eyes away from the top screen – even for a moment – a hazardous proposition. While you're invulnerable when your shoulder-button activated laser is firing (indeed, barging into enemies is one way to kill them), once you've run out of charge you're entirely defenceless. As such, learning to move your ship in and out of attacking range while simultaneously sweeping the touchscreen to make your enemies vulnerable is the only way to survive.



Dream Trigger's mechanics don't seem to change over the levels, which is probably why the visuals vary so massively. Organic designs are the more interesting, moving the game away from *Rez*-style abstraction

Helping you to slip into the trance-like state you'll need is a soundtrack and lightshow reminiscent of *Rez*. Achieving a high score causes more parts of a song to start playing, while the kaleidoscopic levels each have their own visual style. One might be deep sea themed – with you shooting jellyfish-style enemies – while another goes for a Tron-stlye inside-a-computer aesthetic.

While *Dream Trigger*'s mix of entrancing aesthetics and high-intensity mechanics seems well-tuned, 11 per cent of players may find it more difficult than intended. The need to use the circle pad and stylus simultaneously means left-handers will have to bump the stylus to their weaker side. An alternative control scheme is available, in which holding down Y gives your avatar the invincibility-sapping power of the stylus on the bottom screen, but we'll need more time to see if it's as useful – or satisfying – as the stylus/circle pad approach.

Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

Veteran gun for hire tests its skills in another dimension

FORMAT: **3DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**



Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D is more than just a cynical port of a subgame. Every aspect of it suggests that the title has been tweaked, optimised and modified to best suit the new platform. If the original appearance of Mercenaries mode in *Resident Evil 4* was the first fledgling attempt at a Bio-Organic Weapon, it could very well have grown into a transgenic pocket tyrant.

Mercenaries 3D will feel familiar to anyone who's experienced previous incarnations, but this is a measure of how well the game has been adapted rather than a criticism. In terms of presentation, this is one of the most visually pleasing games released on the handheld to date, though Capcom hasn't stopped there. Minor additions and improvements are everywhere – for example, each character can now be customised by selecting from 30 skills which affect factors such as reload time or the strength of melee attacks.



Playable characters – which can be customised – revealed so far include Chris and Claire Redfield, Hunk and Jack Krauser

Surprisingly, this is the first *Resident Evil* title in which players are able to move and shoot simultaneously – which in practice shifts the focus on to amassing a high score with less worrying about safety. A firstperson view is also present that uses the traditional *Resident Evil 4* control method, but from a perspective designed to fully exploit the 3D.

There's also a heavy emphasis on the co-op game, with players able to team up locally or online, communicating via simple in-game gestures. The importance of combination melee attacks has been increased, encouraging players to fight together and attain grades not possible in the singleplayer game

Mercenaries mode has always been unapologetically simplistic, and the new features exist to reinforce and improve an already irresistible mechanic. Anyone craving traditional survival horror might be tempted to wait for *Revelations*, but as an action title *Mercenaries 3D* is already looking like a fine mutation.

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Survivor

With more of a rebirth than reboot, Crystal Dynamics gets serious about Tomb Raider

In the early days of the project, when there was little else to go by, the team at Crystal Dynamics rallied around a single sentence: 'You think you know me'. It was stark yet evocative, an elegant reminder of just how much work lay ahead.

The team's job was a tricky one – it had to take something familiar and make it striking, mysterious and attention-grabbing again. It had to find the unexpected depths behind a famous façade. The solution, as it turned out, is ingenious, imaginative and calculated. Sometimes, what you leave behind is as important as the things that you take with you.

Everybody thinks they know Lara Croft, but just who is it that they think they know? A quick wander around Crystal Dynamics' cavernous and quietly plush headquarters in Redwood City reveals at least half-a-dozen versions of the iconic heroine. In the corridors and hallways stand sculptures from the team's own incarnations, confident and only gently caricatured, while farther in among the workstations, tacked to the walls and taped to cubicles, are posters from the franchise's early days: jagged polygonal studies dating back to the Core Design games, and even pencil sketches from the series' creator, Toby Gard, the oldest of which have a slight anime look.

"We did a book called The Art Of Tomb Raider that was released last year, and there were probably three years of work that went into that book," says **Darrell Gallagher**, Crystal Dynamics' head of studio, as he heads towards the elevators. "We collated all of the artwork – we unearthed artwork from Core, and all the stuff we'd done at Crystal. I asked Toby Gard if he had any other stuff, and he said he'd dig around in boxes. A few weeks passed, and he walked into my office, and he had this tube that was about 12 inches long. He pulled it out, and he said: 'That's the first ever drawing of Lara Croft'. It was just in some box somewhere in his garage. I think she was still called Lara Cruise back then. It was one of those gems we found, and it sat on my desk for about a month."

Down on the studio's ground floor in a conference room labelled London Calling – because it's where the team gathers when London's on the phone for updates – we get to see Lara's new face: a redesign to go with the franchise's first true reinvention since its origins in the mid-'90s. With striking brown eyes and a familiar ponytail, it's a face that fans of the series will undoubtedly recognise, but this Lara's younger than the traditional version – younger and scared.

"On the creative side, she still has to be a strong, intelligent character who can get herself out of situations, but something we haven't seen before is an arc where she starts as somebody who is inexperienced and becomes something beyond that," says Gallagher. "Completely

TITLE: **TOMB RAIDER**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**



Is there a danger that Lara could end up designed by committee? "We have a Lara group," says Horton, "who know the character and can give you opinions. Looking at something over and over, you tend to lose objectivity"





Lara's wardrobe is a little more conventional for this reboot. "The situation she's thrust into, she didn't plan it," laughs Stewart. " She's in the clothes she was in when the Endurance went down"

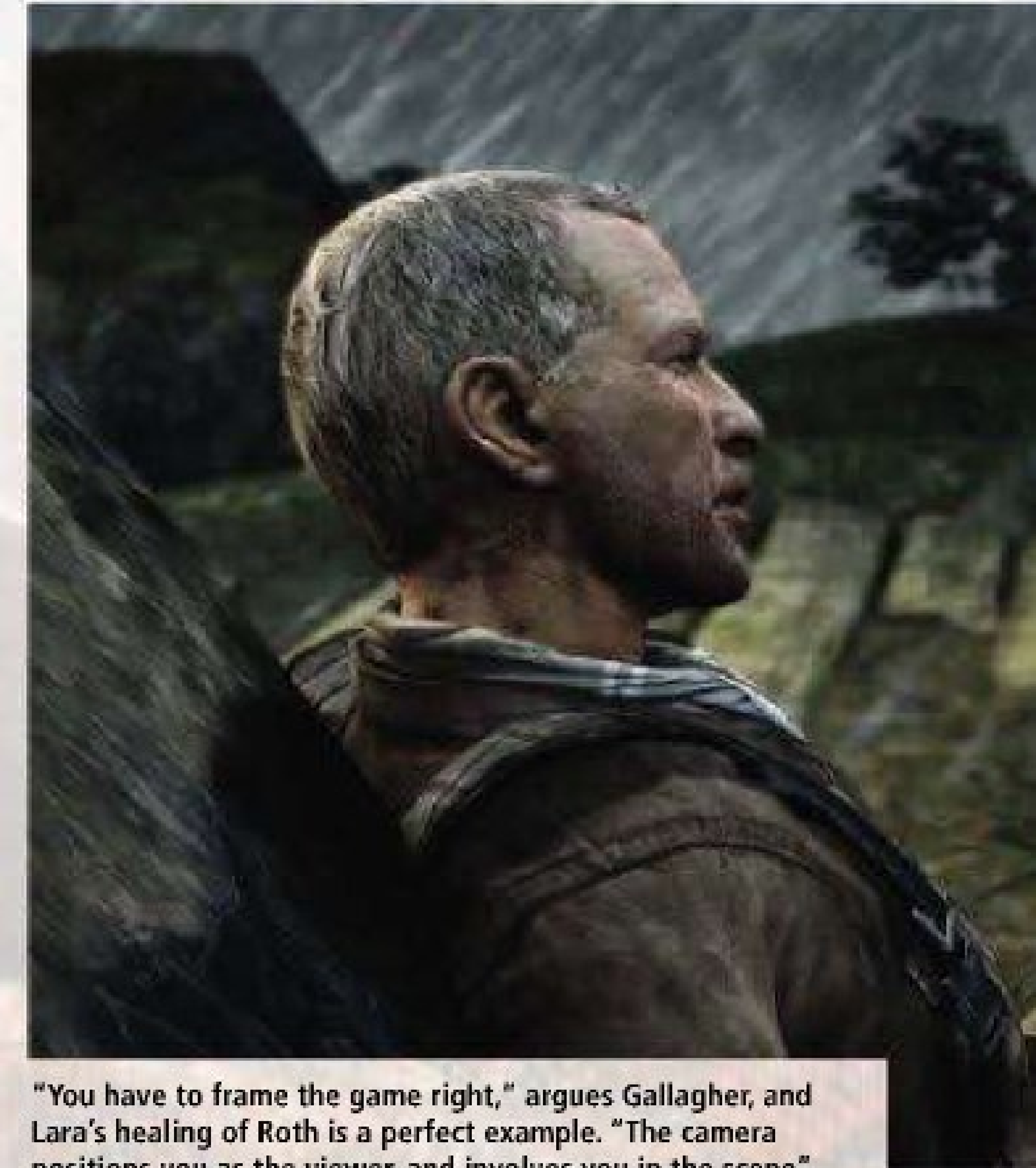
changing the character was something we felt we couldn't do, so it was about choosing the parts that work for this generation. That was a really difficult process, actually. You move too far away and it's not *Tomb Raider*. Keep it too close and it's a direct sequel to *Underworld*."

And the latest *Tomb Raider* is anything but a direct sequel to *Underworld*. The uncomfortable truth might be that it's something of a reaction to it. "It's an origin story," says global brand director **Karl Stewart**, picking up a controller and launching the demo build. "That's something we've never had before. It's about keeping the character but taking it in new directions. It's taking those iconic things and looking at them through the filter of survival."

Tomb Raider – the simplicity of the name reinforcing how seriously the studio is taking this reboot – is all about survival. It begins as Lara Croft's first ever expedition, aboard the HMS Endurance, is cut short by a shipwreck that leaves the rookie adventurer washed ashore on a mysterious Japanese Island. Fortune and glory are off the cards: instead, the game's primary agenda is keeping Lara alive. "Once we had the survival feel, it allowed us to really clearly see what we should keep and what we can do away with," explains Gallagher, slicing his hand down on his palm, miming, perhaps, the way that the team lopped off OTT snowmobile races, the grapple line and radio headset, and Croft Manor. "Once you flip her motivations, everything comes with it: she's not on the offensive anymore, she's on the defensive."

Crystal Dynamics is turning the world of *Tomb Raider* on its head, in other words, so it's fitting that the demo – the team refers to it rather carefully as a "slice of the overall vision" – begins with Lara Croft upside-down, suspended from the ceiling of a cavern, held in a canvas sack after being captured.

It's a jarring collision of the familiar and



"You have to frame the game right," argues Gallagher, and Lara's healing of Roth is a perfect example. "The camera positions you as the viewer, and involves you in the scene"

the new. It's a tomb of sorts – the walls spotted with candles and menacing little shrines – but it's clearly the lair of a madman rather than a stately resting place for a pharaoh. And the surprises have just begun: after a quick Newton's Cradle introduction to the game's physics and fire systems, which sees Lara rocking herself back and forth in order to burn through the canvas, she lands on a nasty spike – something the old Lara, with her impossible grace, would never have done. It's a scripted moment, but a brutal one, and coming seconds into the game it's clear that the designers are very literally making a point. "She's mortal," says Stewart. "She's not that Teflon character any more, so you have to think twice in every situation."

The world Crystal Dynamics has created is beautifully ugly, vividly textured and dense with detail in the form of the scrap and flotsam that fills the cave. A primitive torch lights the way and burns away blockages as Stewart pushes Lara through the area – it's known with a creepy cosiness as the Den – and even though the game's apparently running on a heavily reworked version of *Underworld*'s aging Crystal engine, it can be hard to take in all the little flourishes: the water draining across rocks, the trails of sooty sparks given off by open flames. If this truly is a representative slice of code, Crytek and Epic have some healthy competition.

Up ahead is a puzzle, which in standard *Tomb Raider* parlance would indicate heavy switches and ancient clockwork. Here it's a much more human kind of muddle, as Lara must open up a passageway with some oil drums that are littering the ground. Exploding barrels are hardly new to the lexicon of videogames, but there's a twist: the drums are surrounded by curtains of water, which will extinguish any flame before it can ignite them, and the solution comes from a rather humble source, by way of junk that the Den's owner has left lying around. Crates that bob through the water can be set alight before









Top: Crystal Dynamics' global brand director, Karl Stewart. Above: Darrell Gallagher, studio head, who worked on *Tomb Raider Legend* and *Anniversary* before helming the reboot

being eased on to a cantilever mechanism made from a dented shark diving cage, and dropped down a secondary chute towards their target. The brainteaser still revolves around planning and physics, then, but it takes into account new elements like water and fire, and it's built around a human story – a scene of frantic jury-rigging rather than mystical machines. It's classic *Tomb Raider*, but not as you've seen it before, and it's delivered with a wealth of detailing.

"Once we had the survival focus and the relatable character goal, everything started coming with it," explains Gallagher. "So when we give Lara a puzzle or something to escape from, it has to be something we could imagine her really facing. I often imagine what I'd do in that kind of situation. What would you do? You'd freak out, burn stuff, thrash around. Rather than getting into the designer's head with some of the old puzzles, we wanted to put Lara in a gritty situation, and let you use a space in a way that you expect to use it. Experimentation."

Throughout the Den sequence, Lara is centre

Princes and pistols

Game series don't survive for decades without fans, and *Tomb Raider* has some of the oddest – and the richest, apparently. "Legend has it, and I hear through people who have met him, that the Crown Prince of Bahrain is the biggest *Tomb Raider* fan in the world," laughs Gallagher. "He's bought every *Tomb Raider* game ever made – and every version of every game ever made – and played them religiously. Apparently, he buys two copies of every game because, one, he can afford it, and two, because he's such a big fan he's afraid one might not work so he ensures he has a backup. We've never had any feedback, but he's welcome to come to the studio. This is an invitation, through Edge, to the Crown Prince."

stage, as a camera that often moves in uncomfortably tightly captures instances when she mumbles encouragement to herself, or panics when the water in a passageway comes up to her chin. "One of our goals is camera performance," says Stewart. "We're using the camera to help portray situations. Here's claustrophobia – along with limited control for the player. You'd have limited control in that much water. It's just trying to make the player feel they're there."

And this particular slice of adventure ends on a frantic note, as the cavern walls begin to close in following the explosion of the oil drums. There's a hint of the series' previous platforming glories in Lara's mad scramble for the exit – with ledges of rock appearing for a few seconds before crumbling into the emerging ravine – along with an emphasis on cinematic staging and quick-time events that calls to mind the physical intricacies of *Heavy Rain*.

Suddenly, after racing up through a collapsing foxhole, Lara emerges into open air and the camera finally pulls back a little, revealing a sunlit bay riddled with dozens of shipwrecks, the crafts' various designs spanning centuries. This nod to the likes of Lost is the first hint of a more traditional mystery story at work; a whisper that there's still a little of the Saturday matinee adventure narrative coiled in alongside the game's new preoccupation with survival. "Lara's escaped her first tomb," laughs Stewart, putting down the controller. "Unlike before, when she used to go in on purpose, now it's all about getting the hell out."

The second half of the demo deposits Lara in one of the game's new base-camp hub areas, this one built around an abandoned Japanese monastery, its wooden beams lashed by rain and its eaves and walkways haunted by wolves. There's the insistent tug of a mission – Lara must locate the wolves' lair to find a radio and medicine for Roth, the injured captain of the Endurance – but it's also a freeform space built with exploration in mind.

In the final game, base camps will allow you to upgrade Lara's skills or salvage and create new items, and will grant fast travel between unlocked areas. If the Den and its claustrophobic horrors are a good indicator of the tone Crystal Dynamics is reaching for with its latest project, this is a fascinating glimpse of the proposed structure. "We're not an open-world game," says Stewart. "We're a free hub game: we don't want to give up those big story moments."

"The shift in structure goes back to the concept of putting a character in a survival situation," says Gallagher, wincing apologetically as he returns to the team's favourite topic. "We wanted a beginning and middle and end to this story, the full cycle of moving from one kind of character and watching them change. We felt the globetrotting from the past would kind of dilute that experience. Instead, it's a sense of: everything goes down here. This is the place. This is ground zero and it's all-inclusive."

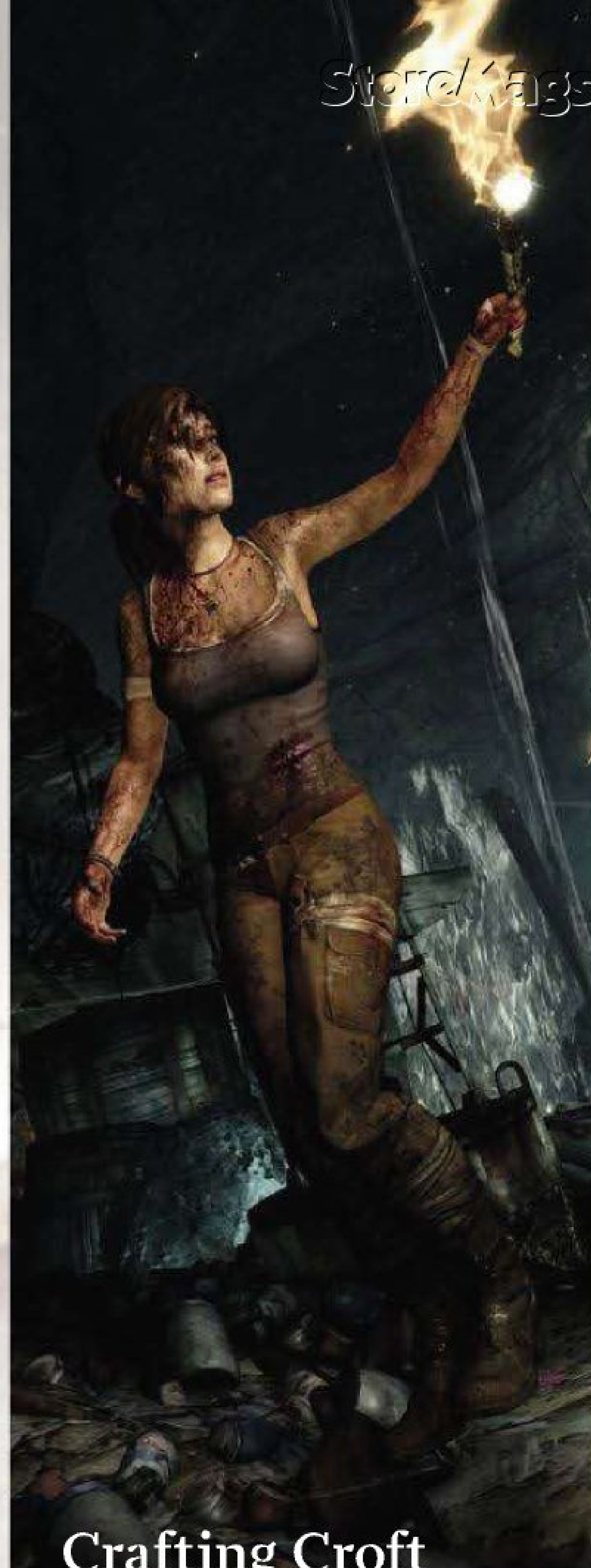
Stewart describes the ethos as "if you can see it, you can get there", which is a huge departure from the fixed, artfully non-interactive vistas of the previous games. With the design's hubs and spokes, it's an approach that has been







"This is real-world application of physics," says Stewart as Lara makes her way through the Den. "Fire population [above], buoyancy, action-reaction. It's about delivering what you expect from a world, and then allowing you to come up with solutions"



Crafting Croft

A new approach to *Tomb Raider* calls for a new approach to its lead character, and art director Brian Horton and his team came to the job with an understandable sense of trepidation. "It was daunting in a lot of ways, because you have to retain some of the iconic nature, but also to bring her forward and make her relevant for the modern gamer," he explains. "We just felt that as long as that story was right, we could redesign the character to fit that, and it would still be Lara Croft.

"We knew we wanted to bring Lara to a more believable space, not just in terms of wardrobe but in terms of physicality. That was a tenet early on. That in itself took her in a certain direction. As for the iconic stuff, the ratio of eyes to nose to mouth? Even though they're less stylised, they're still pretty much intact. Her eye colour, the ponytail – these are classic silhouette things. But we also looked at who she is, so her curiosity, her willingness to go into the unknown. And all of that came up through the character design. As for the wardrobe, we wanted the clothes not to feel like an outfit so much as things you could just buy off the rack. But then they're assembled in ways that remind you of the classic Lara Croft."



Being guided through a wolves' lair by the bleeping of a radio and the flashing of its red light makes for an elegantly creepy set-piece. Situation analysis is key to most of the game's puzzles. "It's about asking: what was this space used for?" says Stewart

seen most recently in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* – an updating of the old *Metroid* strategy that has players steadily opening up the game's real estate by exploration and 'gear-gating', as Stewart puts it. Eventually, Lara will be able to move beyond the monastery itself and scale every inch of the nearby mountain, headed, presumably, for a distant radio mast. But to do that, she'll need to have the climbing axe at her disposal.

Until then, the monastery is a perfect place to demonstrate the new traversal system, and within seconds it's clear that plenty of the series' DNA has survived – and even evolved. Getting around in *Tomb Raider* has become a truly beautiful process, the fleet-footed animation balancing grace with a kind of crunchy ruggedness. Although Lara's theoretically on her way to the wolves' cave to progress the narrative – Instinct Mode, another borrowing from *Arkham Asylum*, allows you to highlight animal tracks and other potentially useful pieces of scenery – there's no set way to get there, and the design team hopes players will spend plenty of time exploring the place for the sake of it.

The developers appear to be aiming for a sweet spot somewhere between the rigid platforming of the previous *Tomb Raider* games, and the carefree elegance of *Assassin's Creed*. There's no lock-on sucking you automatically towards ledges, while aftertouch air-control lets you course-correct on the fly. Lara may be young and inexperienced, but she can still jump from spars of spindly rock and swing from flagpoles. As with the puzzle back in the Den, then, it's got a great *Tomb Raider* feel, but it's richer and more dynamic.

"The player has to feel the character as they're moving, and various games do this in their own ways," says Gallagher, after admitting there's been a lot of discussion as to what modern traversal should feel like. "*Assassin's Creed* looks good, but for my money, when I'm moving the sticks I want to feel I'm moving the character as much as possible. With our demo, you're playing that character every moment. There aren't a lot of smoke and mirrors – there aren't magical jumps that happen, and the animation looks great. You have control the whole time, and we hope that makes you feel closer to the character. If you miss a jump, that's something you did rather than something the engine did. There has to be that feeling of threat underpinning everything. You don't want traversal to be frustrating, but if you don't feel that threat coming to fruition, you're not delivering on survival."

"Our goal," says Stewart, "is that we will give you these big open spaces, and then give you the freedom to move about freely."

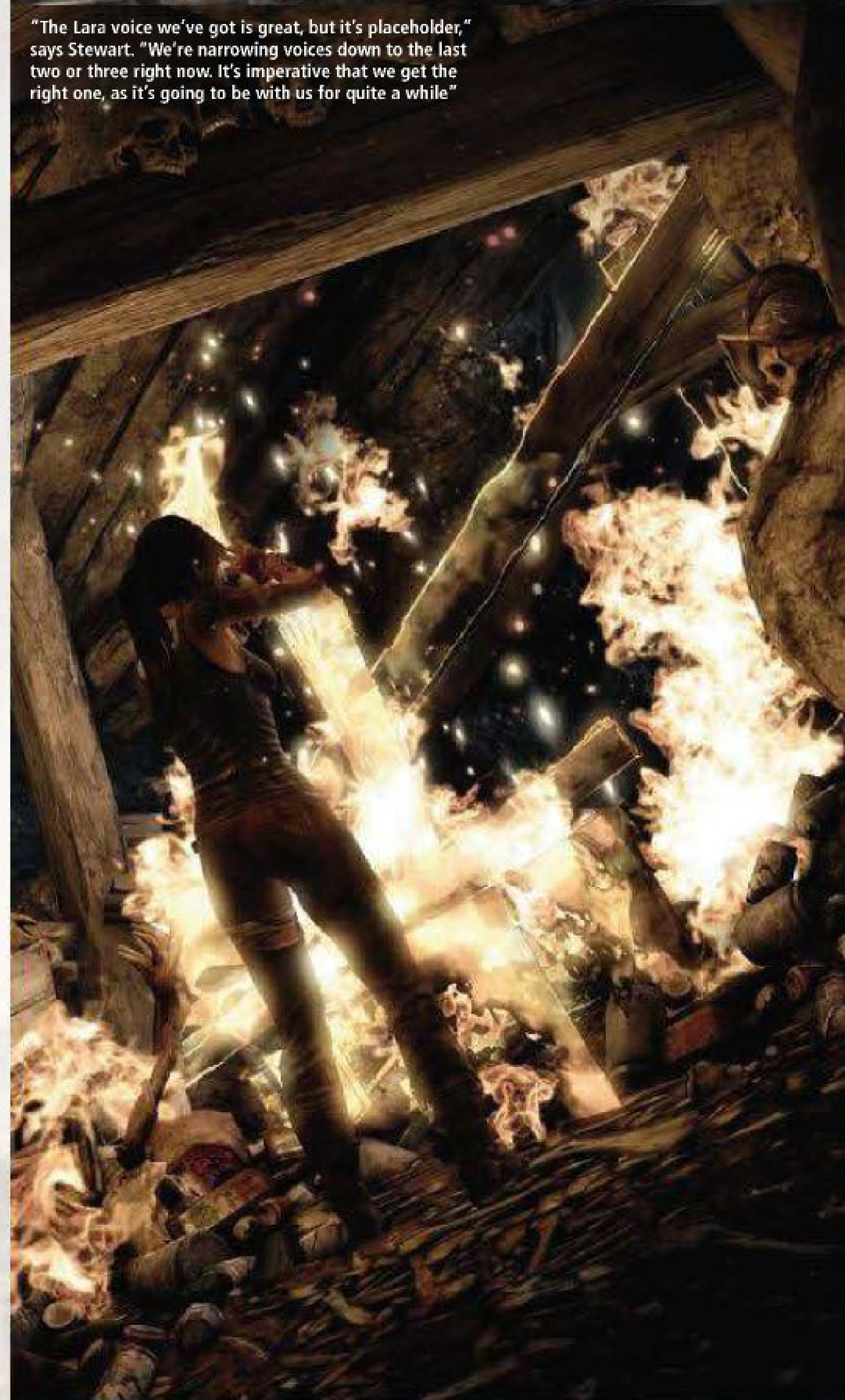
> "You have control the whole time, and we hope that makes you feel closer to the character. If you miss a jump, that's something you did rather than something the engine did"

While reboots are increasingly common in the movie business, such a root-and-branch reworking of a videogame licence with the vocal fanbase of *Tomb Raider* represents a significant risk. That said, *Underworld* performed confidently rather than spectacularly at retail, and for the past few years there's been a strong perception that Lara's lost ground to flashier, more characterful, newcomers like Nathan Drake from Naughty Dog's cinematically styled *Uncharted* series. Following offshoot *Guardian Of Light*, Crystal Dynamics has clearly sensed that the time is right to be bold.

"A reboot for us felt like the necessary thing to do," admits Gallagher. "Lara had hit her apex



"The Lara voice we've got is great, but it's placeholder," says Stewart. "We're narrowing voices down to the last two or three right now. It's imperative that we get the right one, as it's going to be with us for quite a while"





in how she was before, and we didn't really feel we could take that any farther. It was a chance to look at everything again, bring new people in who had been interested in the franchise before but didn't feel like Lara was modern enough. We left no stone unturned as we were going through the concept, and then kept the right stones. The crucial thing is that it feels like her, even though it's completely different."

There's also perhaps a sense that a studio too often regarded as a talented caretaker is itching to put more of its mark on the franchise. "The *Trilogy* games weren't official reboots for us," says Stewart. "They were just Crystal's interpretations of the game as it was. We see this as a fully fledged reimagining." Is that a bit like borrowing dad's car and hoping you don't crash it? Gallagher laughs. "Every game feels a bit like you've got dad's car and you don't want to crash it," he says, "but I get the sentiment. We wanted to take risks. We felt that we'd done some really great games after inheriting *Tomb Raider* from Core, and one of our goals now was to do something that people didn't expect, that felt fresh. To achieve that, you have to be willing to take the car and floor it. What I would say is, when you get your hands on dad's car, the first thing you want to do is open up on it, right? You want to see what it's got. You have to take the risk to enjoy that moment of having it. It is a sacred and fragile thing, but you have to go for it. You're not going to make it sacred again unless you make that big leap."

Inverting the core appeal of the franchise so smartly is a brave move; coming from a team that has thus far handled the licence carefully and sympathetically, it's a staggeringly exciting departure. And, ultimately, if *Arkham Asylum*, with its slickly reappropriated systems and neat blending of narrative and environment, sheds an interesting light on Crystal Dynamics' latest game, it's the Caped Crusader, rather than Lara Croft herself, who looms largest over the studio's current ethos, as the developer takes the ultimate escapist heroine and attempts to add a little humanity to her. "I think it can be done," says Stewart. "I think it's been done. We look around and see other mediums doing it. We hate to hark on, but Batman's done this very well. Take the old school – Arnie, Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer: those films eventually became caricatures of Batman.

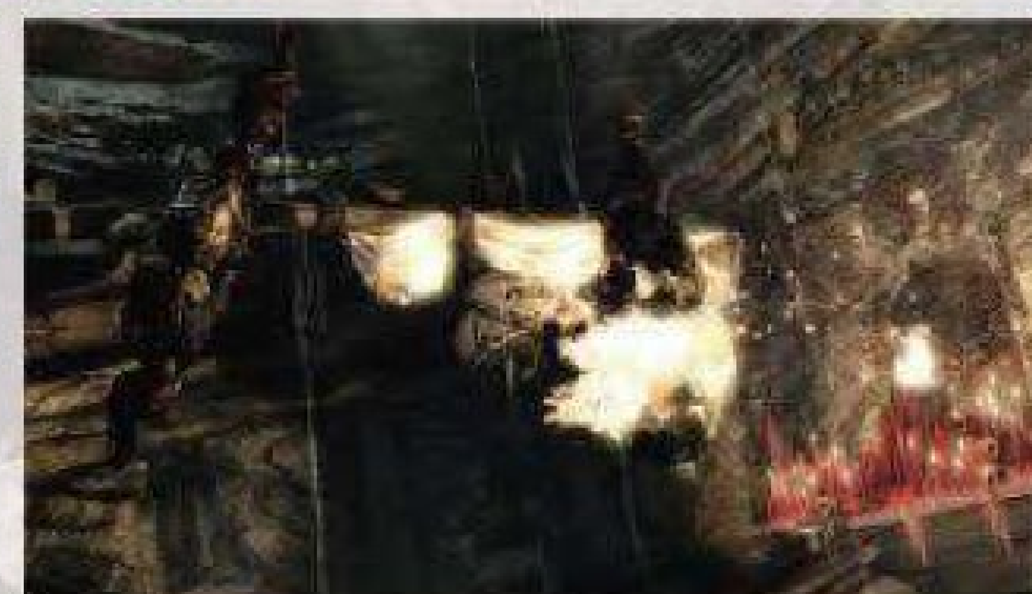
"But when you watch Batman Begins, the first third of that movie is about re-establishing the values of that character so that when he finally puts on that mask, you know what he's really about. It's the same thing here." He laughs. "I can't imagine Christopher Nolan phoning up Tim Burton and saying: 'Hey, what do you think?'"



"We wanted to take risks. We felt that we'd done some great games after inheriting Tomb Raider, and one of our goals now was to do something that people didn't expect"







"Pulling a lever and having a door open – there isn't much emotion to it," argues Gallagher. "This is much more about crafting a story around each puzzle, and having the player feel something. Having that tension to each puzzle gives it a little something else"

Modern combat

If platforming and puzzles suggest that the series' strengths have not been forgotten, the demo's few combat instances show the team hard at work on *Tomb Raider*'s weaker aspects. Crystal Dynamics is yet to show too much on this front – although it's interesting to note that Captain Roth packs a very familiar set of twin pistols while Lara, in early stages, has a bow slung across her back – but the rare moments in the demo that pit Lara against attackers (a berserk islander one minute and a wolf the next) suggest violence is far more close-up and convincing this time around, often unfolding in one-on-one set-pieces. If nothing else, it's better than *Uncharted*'s tendency to switch back and forth between coffee-shop one-liners and queasy mass-murder.

Q&A: Brian Horton

Crystal Dynamics' senior art director and his team are currently at work constructing an entire island for Lara Croft to explore. Here's what they're up to.

The Den is packed with details: how do you go about creating an environment like that?
The thing that is great about the Den is that we work with a very modular approach. There are, like, three rocks that make up the entire area – you'd never see it, though, because we twist and rotate those modular elements. Then we go into other areas: we knew the Den is a very story-driven space, and that this game is all about visual storytelling. We knew that crafting what this space was going to look like was going to require a lot of detail, because it's very tight and confined. We tend to scale our art based on the situation, and we were able to pack a lot of detail into it because our sight lines are so well concealed.

What are the biggest art design challenges for *Tomb Raider*?
The big challenge for us, Lara aside, is trying to always tell a survival story. So everything we do, we want to make sure we're always telling that story. Then we've got the contrasts between these very tight spaces and these very claustrophobic spaces and then these very big spaces, and we need to make it feel like a unified experience. Those are technical challenges. But the most important thing is that we want to make sure that this island Lara's on feels like it has a life of its own, as it's the second most important character in the story besides Lara. The challenge for us is to make a place you believe in, to bring this culture to life.

We deliberately stepped away from some of our traditional roots when it comes to tone. We're going for much more of a dark and realistic aesthetic. It's not just realism for realism's sake: it helps to tell this particular story. We need to ground this character in a place that you believe in. Once you believe it, hopefully you'll feel these emotions. So the objective was not to romanticise it.

The focus on elemental physics means that a lot of things which would have previously been set dressing are now functioning parts of the environment.
How do you encourage readability while making things look pretty?
Visual language is always one of the big challenges. You want to make the world feel believable, but you also want to know what you can interact with. We spend a lot of time teaching players what their tools are, from the very start of the Den where you see cloth, and you see all the different stages of how fire and cloth work, and how water then affects that. We just spend time ramping simple, well-recognised physical attributes up. Any time we create a space, we ask ourselves: what's the most important thing Lara has to see in any room? And then we tend to craft our world around that. Using contrast, pointing the player through the composition of the space, surface qualities, and motion – these are all tools to draw players' attention.

Were the base-camp hubs a completely different design challenge to what you faced in creating the Den?
The goals are very much the same. We want to point Lara in the right direction, but we also know that this level isn't so much about linear progression. It's about having fun and exploring and finding your own way through. So what we try to do is create a set of rules that allow players to interact with any building, so they can always do the same sorts of things. As an art challenge, meanwhile, we use those lanterns in the landscape very selectively – they're almost like points of light that draw your eye. You start to draw a line and your mind connects the dots. We've situated designers and artists together for this project, so there's a constant conversation between design and art. We create the space together.







Online gaming and the need for speed

Why Virgin's 50Mb broadband service is the choice of serious online players

Ever since online gaming moved from being a niche activity to become a fundamental component of so many PC and console games, the importance of a fast, reliable connection to the Internet has only become more pronounced. Anyone with considerable experience of playing online will have their share of horror stories relating to dropped connections, lag and other performance issues that have resulted in threats of hardware being launched out of windows, but it doesn't have to be this way. Opt for Virgin's 50Mb fibre-optic broadband service and you may never again experience the shame of finishing last in a racing game or letting down your team in an FPS because of an embarrassing ping rate. Access to a super-fast broadband connection is made more important, too, in this age of frequent console firmware updates and an increasing focus on heavyweight DLC.

With so many Internet touchpoints in existence nowadays, speed of connection has never been so important, and Virgin's 50Mb service lends itself to multiple users. One user in the home could be watching YouTube videos via his iPhone, for example, while another talks to her friend via Skype on a PC as another is streaming iPlayer content to his Wii, and yet there is enough bandwidth in the pipe to simultaneously maintain super-fast online gaming on a console or PC.

Among the many ISP options available today, Virgin's reputation for delivering speed is unparalleled. It has picked up 'Fastest Home Broadband Award' in 2009 and 2010 from Top10.com, and 'Best Super-Fast Broadband' in the Simplicity Digital 2011 Customer Choice Awards, but more importantly the government communications regulator, Ofcom, has assembled a report which reveals that Virgin is the only ISP whose real-world speeds come close to the stated performance, delivering "on average between 90% and 96% of advertised speeds" for downloads, both on- and off-peak. This is against competitors delivering an average of only 6.2Mb for 'up to' 20/24Mb packages (see tinyurl.com/4attlov).

To find out if you can benefit from the broadband service best suited to gamers who care about performance, visit virginmedia.com/gaming or call 0800 052 0811.

DEATH PRO



OF

WITH DRIVER SAN FRANCISCO, REFLECTIONS' PEDAL-STAMPING COP TANNER IS GRANTED NEW LIFE BY A KNOCKOUT BLOW

Half a decade has passed since a full-blown *Driver* game hit home consoles, but Ubisoft Reflections' studio manager **Gareth Edmondson** assures us the developer hasn't merely been spinning its tyres: "It's obviously been a long production, but what we have tried to do is innovate, and that is hard. In order to come back strong with something that really wows people, we needed to take the time to do that."

Given the shortcomings of *Driver 3* (which Gareth and brother/creative director **Martin Edmondson** concede shipped "unfinished") and the solid but lightweight *Parallel Lines* behind them, *Driver San Francisco* finds Reflections once again capitalising on its strengths as a studio. "I think with some of the later *Driver* games we de-focused somewhat, with getting out of the car and running around," says Martin Edmondson. "*Driver 2* was the first game to do that, and I think in the later games we focused on it a little bit too much. We've [now] learned to get back to the real feeling of being in the traffic – when you play this game it really is unlike any other driving game."

In principle, these claims sound like music to a purist *Driver* fan's ears. In practice, getting behind the wheel of some serious American muscle removes any lingering doubt: Tanner really is back.

The opening moments of *Driver San Francisco* set up the simple premise: criminal mastermind Jericho's police transport, escorted by Tanner and returning partner Tobias Jones, finds itself bombarded from above with a rocket launcher and some choice one-liners. Tanner chases down the fleeing felon by way of an interactive tutorial and then Reflections introduces you to its big twist. After a particularly nasty collision leaves Tanner comatose, the player enters the gameworld of his unconscious mind, acquiring the ability to possess – or, in the developer's parlance, 'Shift' – into any driver he chooses.



Bored of cruising around town in your crumpled '70s Mustang? Press X and you're ejected from the driver's seat, time slows to a crawl, and you're dragged to the skies with a bird's-eye view of the map. See a car down there you like? Another tap of X and the camera swoops down instantly and you're on your merry, mischievous way. "The overarching inspiration is Google Earth, but live," Martin Edmondson explains. "So when you go to the absolute top level of Shift it's like looking down on the world." It's also an excellent get-out clause for bad driving. Heading for a 120mph collision with a truck? Boom, you're now taking granny for a drive in the country. Jumping your car off a five-storey apartment block with the police in tow? Boom, you're in a taxi running around town.

Taking over certain map-marked vehicles triggers missions which, upon completion, earn you precious Will Power points that go towards sending Tanner back to the real world. This ethereal framing conceit runs counter to the original entry's PlayStation-era manifesto of realism and gritty street life, but not only does it set up some well-timed laughs, it also justifies giving players the

The game doesn't skimp on visual spectacle, with every side street tempting you to plough through its convenient stacks of boxes

Martin Edmondson, creative director

Gareth Edmondson, studio manager

keys to the city. *Driver San Francisco* exudes a hectic, fun-loving sensibility, which extends to Tanner's own tongue-in-cheek reaction to his bizarre predicament. Your tasks along the way foster a sense of chaotic play, and encourage a cavalier disregard toward how you go about racking up points.

One of our first Shifts involves taking over the wheel from a lady in the middle of a driving lesson, at which point the game invites us to scare the living daylights out of her instructor by any means necessary. Another drops us into the scenario of a TV film crew doing some rush-hour reporting, prompting us to deliver a series of violent money shots by manipulating passing vehicles into situations involving no shortage of fender origami. Those manoeuvres become even deadlier with the introduction of skill upgrades such as Ram and Boost which do exactly what their names imply, giving you the ability to smash obstacles out of your way and charge down an overpowered opponent.

All of the game's innovations would be for nothing, of

"IF YOU THINK ABOUT THE CAR CHASES IN BULLITT OR THE FRENCH CONNECTION, THEY'RE NOT KILLING PEOPLE, IT'S ABOUT DESTRUCTION AND DAMAGE OF THE CARS"

course, if the cars didn't handle well. Fortunately, *Driver San Francisco* remembers Reflections' PlayStation golden age. Above all, the game revels in the act of dangerous driving in a way that *Driver* games haven't for a long, long time. The optional in-car view proves most effective, conveying the urgency of your precision manoeuvres by Tanner's hands gripping, spinning and releasing the wheel as you navigate San Francisco's busy streets. The experience of careering around a hairpin bend into the full glare of the morning sun feels both exhilarating and strikingly filmic.

The first thing you'll notice on a jaunt around town is the density of activity packing the roads and pavements. Understeer on a corner and there's a good chance you'll be greeted by three lanes of heavy traffic or a gang of screaming pedestrians fluttering out of the way like pigeons. The curse of congestion in many open-world games is that the vehicles tend to repeat themselves, but that just wouldn't cut it in a game centred on player choice, and these San Francisco streets teem with variety. Old, new, stolen, blue – Reflections has licensed over 120 car models for players to choose from, covering vans, trucks, sports coupes and classics, to name just a few of the categories. Where *Parallel Lines* divided modernity and nostalgia into two distinct halves of the same story, this particular take on San Francisco offers players an all-encompassing metropolis. The city boasts its own character, too, awash in orange and gold hues from the ever-present California sun, filled with shortcuts, back alleys (strewn with cardboard boxes, naturally) and the potential for you to take off and write your own story in the tarmac. Think Bullitt, Vanishing Point and The Fast And The Furious all rolled into one.

Decant on the competition: "This game is like a buffet. Those games you mentioned [*Hot Pursuit, Split Second, Blur*] were focusing on one specific thing, either races or maybe a bit of chases. You can see just by playing the first hour of the game you have stunts, races, action – new mechanics. It's a much more varied product than any other that has been released recently"

Driver San Francisco is set about six months after *Driver 3*. How returning villain Jericho (above left) and his crew will factor into Tanner's unconscious world hasn't yet been revealed

Driver San Francisco avoids the genre clichés of other sandbox franchises in which mowing down pedestrians feels unavoidable and vaguely encouraged. The lack of 18-rated content marks the series' retreat from the increasingly 'adult' direction of the previous two games, which Martin Edmondson attributes to the game's cinematic influences: "It's not that we wanted to do [violent] stuff but had to pull back from it, it's more about the movies – if you think about the car chases in Bullitt or The French Connection, they're not killing people, it's about the destruction and damage of the cars and property, not people."

In covering all the driving-game bases, and trying to stay faithful to all licensed brands in what is essentially an action game, how do you keep everyone – not least the player – happy? "Some manufacturers don't want so much as a scratch on their vehicle and they don't even go in the game," says Martin Edmondson. The game's lead designer, **Jean-Sebastien Decant**, who previously worked on *Heavy Rain* at Quantic Dream, says: "And [other manufacturers say] no guns, no firearms, no robberies – and *Driver* is all about that!" But some licensors are more enthusiastic, as Martin Edmondson explains: "Certain manufacturers, who'll remain nameless, will say: 'We want to see our car blowing up!'"

Decant has no qualms asserting what he and Reflections' owner of four years, Ubisoft, bring to the table: "Accessibility. In the history of Reflections they have made tough games for hardcore gamers. And this one, the core experience is more accessible than any other Reflections game." Decant's vision for a broader franchise may set off alarm bells in the heads of a certain breed of gamer, but he's adamant that ease of use is crucial to a game with *Driver San Francisco*'s ambition: "It's not about making it easy; it's about having the right 'helpers' so that the AI is challenging but not unfair – for chases, races, getaways. The player has to know what he has to do in an instant. Having the proper information always displayed – especially in a game where you can be in any car at any time, where we change the gameplay a lot from one mission to another – accessibility applies to signs, feedback, UI."

Of course, if the game stands any chance of stealing eyes

Classic cars may be slower, wilder beasts to control than the modern sports models included in the game, but there's a nostalgic joy to their wallowing suspensions

The Shift mechanic is the perfect opportunity for Tanner to get into trouble. What better disguise is there, after all, than the body of another driver, or even an officer of the law?

Jean-Sebastien Decant, lead game designer

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Lead game designer Jean-Sebastien Decant joined the Reflections team just over two years ago. He tells us what makes *Driver* unique, and how a love of film is an essential requirement for all involved.

What do you think has been the key to *Driver*'s longevity?
The PlayStation unleashed a new breed of games strongly inspired by movies. *Resident Evil* tapped into horror, *Tomb Raider* got on the trail of Indiana Jones, and *Driver* struck the Hollywood car-chase chord. These titles were so fresh, exciting and well-executed that they redefined what videogames could be. With its undercover cop context, tight controls, loose handling, *Driver* became an instant videogame milestone. I personally still have fond memories of afternoons spent with friends trying to get the perfect run to edit through the Director mode.

Why do you think so few developers have attempted to mimic the original *Driver*'s concept?
There's always been plenty of excellent action driving titles around, but *Driver* dared to blend the driving genre with a narrative. Mixing stories and driving is not an easy fit. It's quite difficult to develop characters and story arcs when it's all about driving at mad speeds. It takes a special breed of talent to shape up a story with these kinds of constraints.

How does the latest game represent a collaboration between the various Ubisoft studios?
Design- and mission-wise, almost everything has been done on site in Newcastle. We mainly benefited from editorial support. The Ubisoft editorial team is based in its Paris HQ and is composed of very experienced talents from the game industry. They are experts in pacing, signs and feedback, game-loop, narration – basically everything tied to a videogame experience. Their role is to assess all aspects of the game with fresh eyes, as sometimes it's difficult for developers working 24/7 on the same stuff to distinguish the forest from the trees. We worked hand-in-hand for months.

How difficult was it designing a game around an ambitious concept like Shifting?
It was a tremendous feat! At first, the Shift feature was an obsession for all of us. Having the ability to jump into any car, anywhere, at any time, almost made us forget about driving. It took quite some time to identify and build upon the mechanics that were blending the driving and the Shifting. But once we secured these mechanics and defined Shift limitations we recovered our sanity and everything came together. *Driver San Francisco* now features plenty of missions focused on 'traditional' driving, a lot of missions blending driving and Shifting, and also a few totally crazy ones that we could call 'Shift heavy'. More important is that we found a balance where all kinds of players should find satisfaction.

You've previously worked on *Heavy Rain* – are there any major similarities or differences between the process of making that game and *Driver*?
Reflections and Quantic Dream have two things in common. First, both studios are obsessed with movies. Second, they are driven by visionaries that don't limit themselves to technical restrictions or predefined rules from other videogames; and they are obsessed with innovation and quality. But the similarities stop there, as working on *Heavy Rain* was like writing four seasons of a TV show in one, when working on *Driver San Francisco* was like prepping a massive buffet with traditional food and new ingredients imported from outer space.

Handbrake turns are essential, but not easy to pull off. Once mastered, you'll be able to catch the most cunning foe

Players execute Shifts with speed thanks to an intuitive interface. It's a powerful mechanic, and it'll be interesting to see if it's ever reappropriated in other types of game



"MIXING STORIES AND DRIVING IS NOT AN EASY FIT. IT'S QUITE DIFFICULT TO DEVELOP CHARACTERS AND STORY ARCS WHEN IT'S ALL ABOUT DRIVING AT MAD SPEEDS"

away from recent, big-budget productions like *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* and *Blur*, there's one other box it needs to tick – multiplayer. Barring a brief dalliance in the form of *Driver 2*'s co-op, the series has neglected the online space. Not this time around, however – and the integration of the Shift mechanic into these competitive motor challenges makes for an online experience quite unlike any other racer.

"There's always been a problem with multiplayer in driving games, that you crash into the first corner and you're out of the action," says Gareth Edmondson. "Shift totally changes that, and it creates a much more accessible, much more engaging experience. It totally changes the way you play an online game."

Driver San Francisco's components of threat and quick thinking collide head-on in multiplayer, testing your nerves in the process. The Trail Blazer mode sets players in pursuit of the same AI-controlled vehicle, distinguished by motion-blurred taillights, around a fixed portion of the city. Tailgate the car for long enough and you'll rack up the points to seal a victory. It's easier said than done, however, when all around you players vie for the same spot, possession flitting between vehicles with sizzling bolts of pink lightning. It's thrilling and frightening to be amid this chaos, screaming down the highway at breakneck speed only to be obliterated by what was seconds ago an inanimate 4X4. Success requires knowledge of the map, some well-timed Shifts and a careful choice of vehicle. The game encourages all sorts of tactics, and picking out a Porsche a couple of streets ahead, or a truck two cars behind, are equally attractive propositions, but neither guarantees victory.

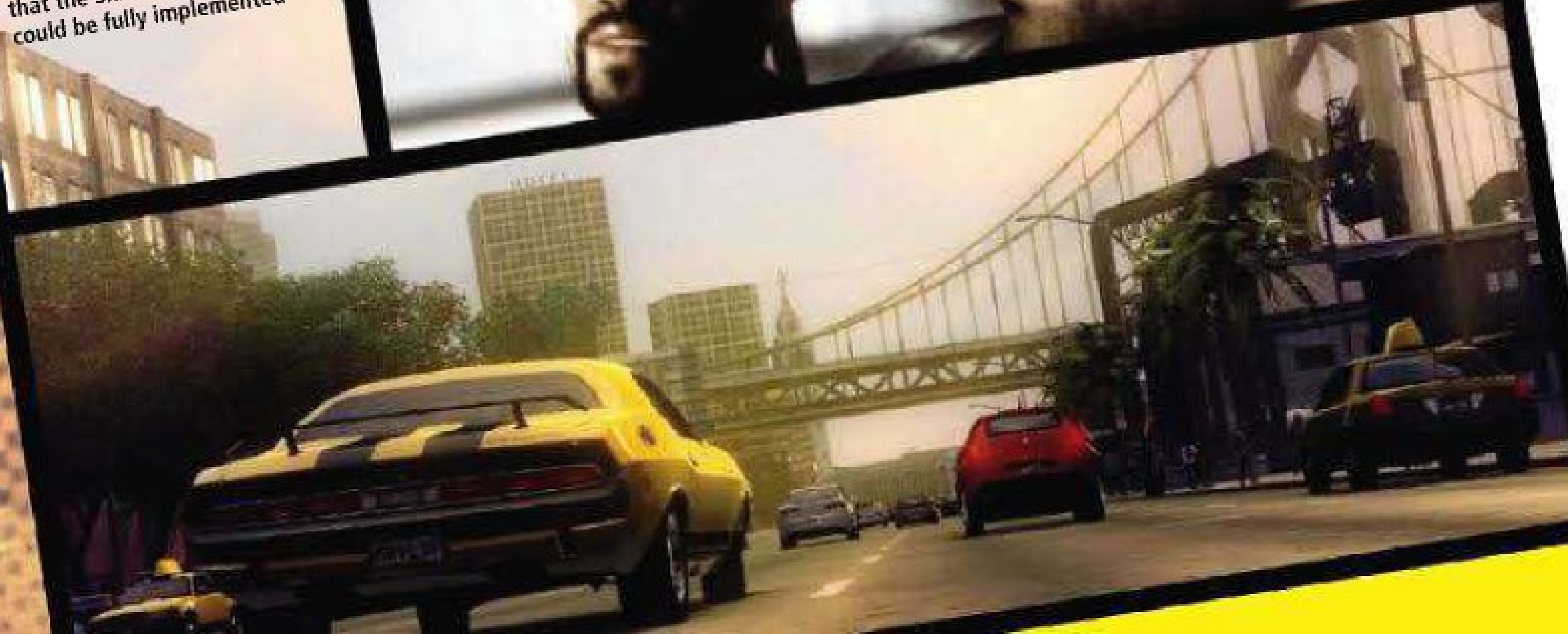
In addition to Trail Blazer, Reflections has promised nine other modes, and we hope they're all as polished, balanced and engaging as the version we've tested. It might be a tough sell to players hooked on singleplayer driving experiences. "I think the most difficult thing has been to communicate Shift properly," explains Martin Edmondson, "that it's not seen as some science-fiction type of thing, that it's rooted in reality. Also that it's a tool to enable the player to have more fun quickly, to make things more accessible. That it's not the main focus of the game – the main focus is driving."

Regardless of the laboured marketing that may be required to get backsides in driving seats, however, Reflections appears to be getting back on fighting form. The studio's current mode: transcend previous mistakes by learning from them, recycle what works, jettison what doesn't, and forge its own path in a congested market. Tanner's new direction could put fuel in the tank of a neglected series.





The game makes use of a proprietary engine – the only way, Reflections claims, that the Shift mechanic could be fully implemented



Can you handle the speed?

LG OPTIMUS 2X ADDS UNPRECEDENTED POWER AND SPEED TO ANDROID™

If you're looking for full-throttle gaming, browsing, video and creativity on a smartphone, look no further than the ultra-fast LG Optimus 2X. As the first dual-core handset to reach our shores, it runs an Nvidia Tegra 2 chipset and has Adobe Flash 10 support. That means faster performance, great video and superlative gaming, all on a sharp, four-inch, 480x800 resolution LCD display.

Beautiful looking and solidly built, the Optimus 2X's Tegra 2 pairs an Arm Cortex A9 CPU with an Nvidia GeForce graphics chip, so web pages open faster, apps snap into life instantly and video streams faster than on older smartphones.

The Android OS is now a real player in the mobile games market, and the high-powered, slick and speedy Optimus 2X takes full advantage. Graphics are bright and punchy, with the touchscreen all but lag-free when controlling the onscreen action.

With an HDMI output, you can send eight-megapixel stills and 1080i video to your TV. The smartphone benefits from full content mirroring through HDMI, so you can play your phone's games on the big screen, with those that use the built-in gyroscope offering full motion control.

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To find out more and to watch exclusive video content from the LG Optimus 2X launch event, visit www.t3.com/lgoptimus2x

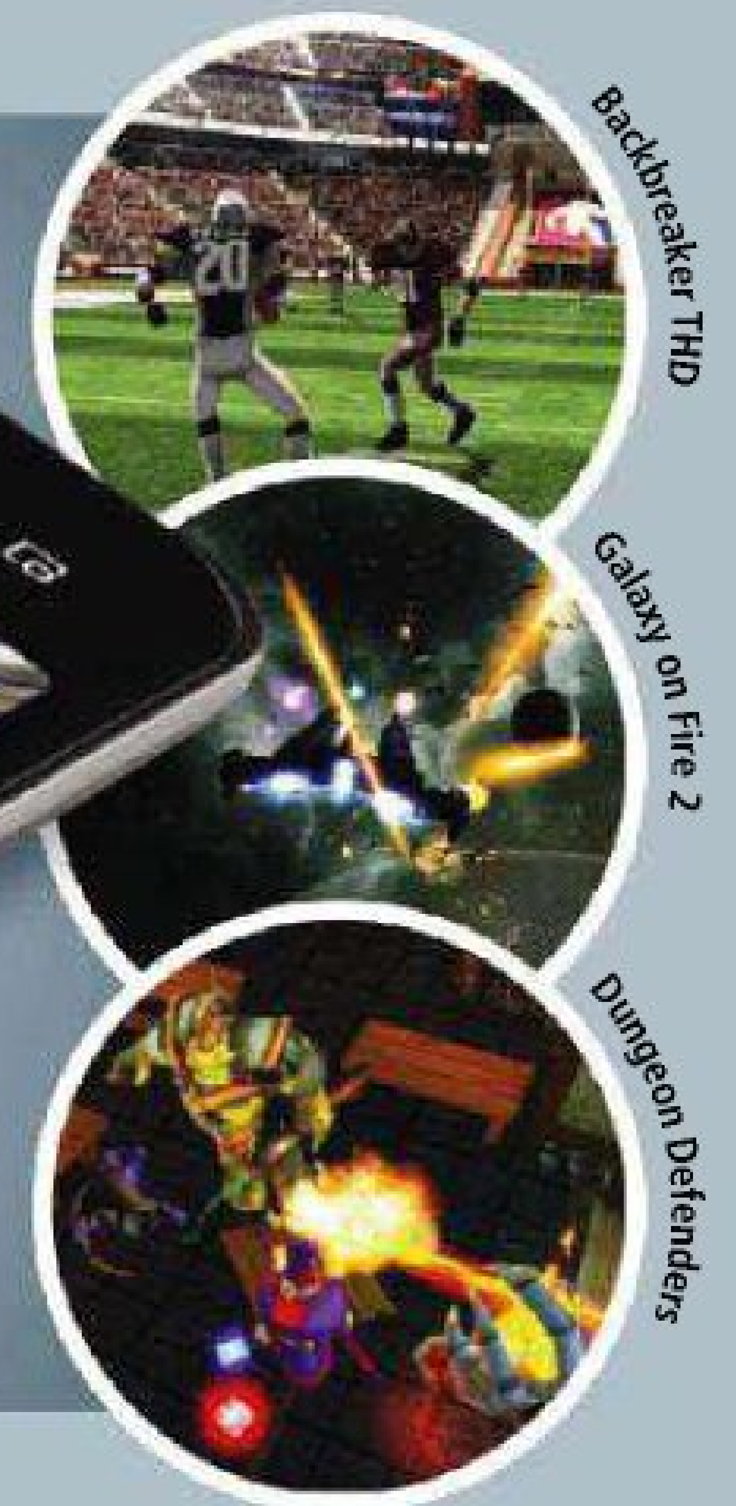




LG optimus 2X











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ASPHALT 5, £3.10
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Touchscreen: 4-inch, 800x480
Connectivity: 10.2Mbps HSDPA, N Wi-Fi with DLNA, Bluetooth 2.1, 3.5mm audio, HDMI, A-GPS
Camera: 8 megapixels/1920x1080 HD
Battery life: 400 hours on standby and 470 minutes talktime
Size/weight: 124x63x10.9mm/139g

Matias Myllyrinne

Building on the success of Max Payne and now Alan Wake, Remedy has positioned itself at the forefront of narrative-based games. We talk to the studio's CEO to get the whole story

Few aspects of game development are more fraught with risk and uncertainty than the launch of a new IP, especially if you're not copying and pasting from a commercially proven template. Remedy, one of the world's leading independent game studios, has proved that you can strip off the body armour and dress your leading man – a novelist, no less – in a tweed jacket. Remedy's CEO **Matias Myllyrinne** sits down with us in the company's Finnish HQ to chat about its vision and to confirm-without-confirming the existence of *Alan Wake 2*.

So, how long will you remain focused on *Alan Wake* before selling the franchise to move on to the next idea?
[Laughs] I don't know, it's a very interesting idea! It's funny that you should mention selling it. We see ourselves as building intellectual properties and something that can transcend from one medium to the next or become something larger than a single game, whether it's a series of games or so forth. That you can continue with something for a longer period of time if you can innovate and bring something new to it, but it's perfectly valid to give it to somebody else and pass the torch and let them do something cool with it. I think both are fine, whether you work with an outside party or not. Like *Death Rally*: we're not an iOS developer, but we wanted to bring it to the iPhone and iPad so it was great to find a local studio [Mountain Sheep] we could work with. We produced it, we helped them out, gave them feedback, but really it was *their* development work, *their* effort that helped to bring it to life.

How does it feel for *Max Payne* to be in the hands of another studio?
We worked very closely with Rockstar and Sam Houser on both *Max Payne* games, so it's with somebody who's helped to build it to where it is, and if you look at their pedigree and their success, they just don't put out bad games. So I'm absolutely certain that they'll deliver, and they'll make it into the game that it needs to be in this time and age. That game will absolutely be a reflection of those efforts – they're a brilliant team, absolutely passionate about quality. They swing for the fences, so I'm very, very happy with how that will come out. I don't have any insight into it or anything like that, but I know those people, and that's enough for me. You have certain bands whose record you'll buy on day one whether you've heard the song or not. That's Rockstar.

Your games take a lot of inspiration from films. Has the lack of a domestic film industry in Finland posed any challenges?
There are a few things that are really interesting. [Finland is] really, really strong in terms of technology, and we're really strong in terms of design and that kind of thing. In terms of not having a film or animation ecosystem to that degree, that presents us with some challenges. Luckily, we're able to pull talent from places where there is that ecosystem – California, Vancouver or somewhere like that – which is really, really nice. And that's something that we've done with the team: there were 12 different nationalities on site for *Alan Wake*.

Also, we solve a lot of the issues: we build our technology and our teams to support the game that we're doing, but we also build it to support our strategy. So, for example, we don't want an army of artists, but we can create a huge immersive world by investing a lot of time into building procedural tools – we can also do some nifty things in the future, in terms of characters, just by going with tools as opposed to building an army of animators to do manual work. And it also keeps it a nicer environment, where you have a smaller, very good team of senior talent working together.

Trying to solve something by throwing people at it might be a good fix in some places, but it's not our fix. It's probably not any less expensive, because you're spending more time building those solutions, but it's a nicer way to work and it allows you to iterate quicker. For example, if we wanted to change things in *Alan Wake*'s world – that now all the trees are going to be one foot more apart from each other because it's better for gameplay – then we can do that with a few parameters. Click, click, click, click, wham – and it happens universally around the world, as opposed to going in and moving every frigging pine tree, which some people might need to do!

> "Publishers genuinely respect us for what we do. We finish what we start, and we don't spare any effort in creating the best possible game"

How have you managed to maintain such a strong creative vision, and retain so much breathing space, in the commerical climate that exists today?
I think publishers genuinely respect us for what we do. We finish what we start, and we don't spare any effort in creating the best possible game that we can. When they talk to us, they want a Remedy game, and they sign up for that, so I think the publishers we've been working with before fully understand going into it what we do and what we bring to the table. On the other hand, we understand what *they* bring to the table, so it's a partnership.

There's a lot of talk about some of these relationships and confrontational stuff like that, but really I don't think it's that dramatic. Once you get into it and go with aligned interests, you're fine. Microsoft wanted great exclusive content for their platform, and I think we delivered on that, very much so. And everybody we've worked with in the past is happy to work



Matias Myllyrinne is Remedy Entertainment's CEO. The Finnish studio was founded in 1995, and made its debut with the PC game *Death Rally* in 1996





Psychological thriller *Alan Wake* (above left) is divided into six episodes, with a further two available as DLC. *Death Rally* (above right) is Remedy's iPhone remake of its 1996 top-down battle racing game for PC. It includes a cameo from *Alan Wake* character Barry Wheeler

with us in the future. I'd like to think it's not only because we've generally made them money, but also because we keep our end of the bargain.

You've avoided adding multiplayer modes up to now. Is that because you feel it would damage Remedy's strong fiction, or was it purely a gameplay decision?
There are some games out there that do multiplayer as a tick-box feature. And nobody really plays them because… if it's kind of like *Counter-Strike* but not as good, I don't see the point of doing that unless you're bringing something that's unique. I like to think of it more as a choice of where you put your effort. I love multiplayer games, don't get me wrong. I love *Battlefield Bad Company 2* and I've played the hell out of it and all the *Call Of Duty* games, and have had my ass handed to me by a 12-year-old from Denmark! [Laughs] But for the kinds of things that we create, we like to focus on storytelling, character and really focus on the pace. And adding me-too multiplayer, if it doesn't make sense, feels unnecessary and somehow forced.

How do you resist potential publisher pressure for multiplayer components – is it simply down to the trust you mentioned?
Yeah, I think that's a reason. You go into it, you lay your cards on the table and explain what you're going to do, and a lot of people seem to appreciate that. We've been in a lucky position, able to choose the people we work with. I think that's a privilege, and one that we obviously hope to keep in the future as well.

In a recent Edge interview, Gearbox president Randy Pitchford bemoaned publishers' obsession with shoehorning multiplayer modes into games. Do you think there is an industry-wide problem?
I think it's mainly driven by a couple of factors. It's rental and resale issues, especially in North America, so there's a mentality of if you add multiplayer, it will slow down the pace of people bringing your game back into the store. I can certainly understand people wanting to mitigate that, but I don't think a me-too multiplayer helps you. I think with any form of entertainment, it needs to provide genuine value for the gamers out there – and it needs to be good to work that way.

My hope and wish is that we create something that people want to keep, not a commodity that you walk away from. It's something that speaks to you emotionally, just like some of the books that I've really, really enjoyed are on my shelf – I might not necessarily go back to them, but there's no way I'm going to give those books up.

It feels artificial to me to pigeonhole games or to quantify them in that way – we've always wanted to walk away from that. On some of the boxes you might have 18 different weapons, five different maps – it's just a list of features as opposed to: 'How do I feel when I play this?' You don't watch a film because it has five different characters and 122 minutes of storytelling using eight different cameras in 12 different locations; you watch a film because it's a summer blockbuster or emotionally engaging, or a really intimate thriller. The King's Speech, for example: if you broke that down into features, what the hell's that about? What, are there, like, five main actors?

> "The audience is maturing. I think we're talking to people who want a different experience to the one they wanted when they were 16"

The game industry is still immature when it comes to discussing and marketing titles. How long do you think it will be before we see a game sold purely on how it might make you feel as opposed to how long it will take to complete?
Schindler's List is a great value proposition, because it's long, right? [Laughs] From our perspective, I think that the audience is maturing, it's getting older, and people who played in the late '90s or early 2000s, they're still playing, right? But they might want a slightly different kind of experience in their 20s, 30s and 40s than they wanted when they were 16. And I think that's certainly part of the market that we're talking to and have engaged. One of the things we try to do is not dumb things down, to actually try to have more nuances and shades of grey in there, and not necessarily pre-digest everything. If you look at the bad old days of gaming, the motivation for some of the opposition was: "I am evil, because I am evil!" And it was like, "OK, you're dressed in red and black so I guess you're evil now".

Maybe we can do more subtle tones of characters. Maybe the good guys aren't always the knight in shining armour or this super ex-Navy SEAL who happens to be articulate and also very muscular. Maybe you can do more shades of grey in their character. Obviously they must be likeable, and somebody that you can associate with, right? But on the other hand, I'll go back to film: I know we're a different medium, we're interactive and that has its own pros and cons, but if you think of a film like Memento, how many likeable characters are there? Very few, but it's still a very good film, very engaging.

One way of extending a game's lifespan is with DLC, something that you've explored. How has that worked out?
It was hugely successful, and really resonated with the fans. We were lucky to be able to have somebody like Microsoft support us on giving the first episode for free for the guys who bought [*Alan Wake*]. You're adding to the value that you're giving people. But I think on the other hand, you need to be very careful – the game that you ship and provide folks needs to have a meaningful ending and closure. Then again we set out to build something large, so we made the doors open to a larger fiction and that gives us the ability to have DL episodes. Having a TV series structure really, really worked well for it because it's kind of natural for a TV series to go on to season two or have specials and stuff like that. I think there's a lot there. Certainly we're looking to embrace more of the digital stuff. Putting those lessons to use in the future will be really exciting. I'm really excited about PSN, [Xbox] Live and some of the stuff on Steam, because it really allows you to directly engage with your audience and provide gaming in different-sized chunks, different stories and spin-offs and so forth. All these opportunities are opened up that you couldn't do before, either for technical reasons or business reasons – there wasn't a model you could work around.

When that will come is the question, rather than *if* it will come. It's definitely something we want to exploit. I don't think the big, huge experiences are going anywhere, but the sooner we go digital as an industry, the better for

everybody. Better for consumers, better for the developers and publishers. Maybe not so good for retail, but then again if you're selling our games as used copies and incentivising people to do that, then I don't really feel sorry for you.

Would you be happy to toy with *Alan Wake*'s world in the same way that Rockstar did with, say, *Undead Nightmare*?
Oh, I'd love to toy with *AW*'s world, I think it would be great! Obviously, our design is slightly different; we are more tightly paced and have less sandbox design in the world, but on the other hand we have this huge big streaming world. There's enough geography there for four games! [Laughs] I'm painfully aware that we're not 'terribly efficient' in using the environment for gameplay. But we're not going to forcefully try to make you go through these different places. Sometimes games do that, and you kind of go: "OK, so this is the level where I go through the power plant, and then I must go to the ice level, and this is the cave level". That's fine, but it's slightly 'gameistic', so we wanted to have more of an open world where you had a sense of location and place, and that's why we had all this landscape around you as opposed to having just a backdrop. It grounds you more in the world, because it's really a physical location, you can see where you're going to be in the future, and it's actually located physically in the right place. So even if you are doing a linear story, it does ground you in that place.

***Death Rally* is Remedy's first iOS title. Are you considering working on any smaller projects in-house too?**
As long as it's good and builds on what we're good at and it's something that we want to do. I think you still want to have the budgets and the means, you don't want to put out something that's... I think compact is fine, but it needs to have a polish to it. It needs to reach a certain expectation bar from ourselves and for our fans – we're our own harshest critics. I think that's one of the things that we are really serious about: whatever we put our brand on. If you think about what brands really are, they're supposed to be a seal of quality so you know what you're really getting. And I hope that we stay true to that brand so that when people see the Remedy logo on a box or a download or whatever, they know that they're getting a certain quality and they can put down their hard-earned money for it without hesitation.

What did you learn from developing *Alan Wake*, and having to scale down your initial vision?
That's the key thing we learned. We tried to combine a sandbox design with a tightly paced thriller. We could have made *a* game, but it wasn't the game we set out to build; those moments just didn't work the way we wanted them to work. And with 20:20 hindsight it's clear that we should have gone for a more tightly paced thrill ride to begin with, which I think we then delivered. Those moments that we had in development where you're supposed to have a dramatic moment, if you're not controlling the pacing, the player's turning up to a scene in a monster truck and you're going: 'OK... it's supposed to be a dramatic love scene, the characters are going through serious marital issues', and yet the player comes jumping over logs with a frigging monster truck. [Laughs]

I think from *Alan Wake* we also learned a lot as a team about how to get faster from point A to point D without necessarily going through B and C. We'll continue to make mistakes, but I think we won't make the same mistakes. But mistakes are part of innovation. You're supposed to fuck up every now and again, and if you're not making mistakes, you're pretty much not taking enough risks. And I think that's perfectly fine and we embrace that: everyone's allowed to fail here at what they do, and I think that's part of the safety net that allows people to try harder and push themselves and the envelope a little bit farther. But obviously we learned from those mistakes – it would be very, very sad if we made the same mistakes again. We'll find new mistakes to make, but they'll land us in a cool and interesting place once again!

How are you applying those lessons to future projects?
We're very confident about the future. In terms of pacing, story, drama, gameplay, technology, we've evolved a lot throughout that project. We learned a lot from the *Max Payne* games, and certainly our next iteration will be our fourth iteration of storytelling, cinematic action adventure. And without confirming or denying the title, obviously your fourth one will be better than your third one, and your fifth will be better than your fourth one because you're improving and honing your skills. And I think we really are playing to our strengths as a company, and it's really cool to see the team come together and build on what is good and valid in *Alan Wake*.




Along with their distinctive looks, Remedy's two *Max Payne* games put as much emphasis on story as they did their no-prisoners, bullet-time-driven action

LAP LAND

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT THE WORLD OF TRACKMANIA COULDN'T GET ANY BIGGER, NADEO REDRAWS ITS BOUNDARIES

Florent Castelnerac is tired. There's grey in the Nadeo founder's hair now, and despite not wearing glasses he stops occasionally to press thumb and forefinger against eyes and nose. His mind wanders and he repeats himself, disguising it with some new analogy to music, economics, humankind's history or the science of creation. Having spent almost a decade on the latter, he now embodies the axiom that simplicity, that essential ingredient of production, can at times be a complicated nightmare.

He's not alone in crafting the sequel to a legitimate videogame phenomenon, but he's hardly flanked by lieutenants either. We count three other people in an office no bigger than a house, though the official headcount is 15. The studio's acquisition by Ubisoft affords the team a satellite unit devoted to community support – a luxury, to hear Castelnerac describe it – with a mighty roster of one. This is exactly the number of engineers, he insists, required to tackle a complex problem. *TrackMania*, though, isn't the half of it. It's a third.

To explain what Nadeo's been up to since the 2006 release of *TrackMania United* (the last game to introduce a new environment) – a time which has seen its community output explode to over 150,000 tracks; almost a thousand unique car models; and a universe of websites including banks, casinos, video shares, clubs and tournaments – Castelnerac shows us a video. It's one that Ubisoft would rather we didn't see, he jokes, because it's hardly your average racing game teaser. More like a prototype for *Spore*, it charts the file accesses of those 15 engineers in what he calls Nadeo's "garden".

Really it's more like a galaxy. In timelapse fashion, we see code bases grow as clusters of nodes, laser-like flashes from staff members' avatars signalling every change. From the studio's debut as a former CG movie house, those twin stars of *Virtual Skipper*, its sailing regatta simulator, and *TrackMania* emerge, surrounded by twinkling community features. *TrackMania*'s growth continues until it dwarfs everything

TITLES: **TRACKMANIA 2: CANYON, SHOOTMANIA: STORM, QUESTMANIA** FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **NADEO** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE: **2011**


maniaplanet
UBISOFT
UBISOFT



WORLD ECONOMY

The good news is that *TrackMania's* virtual currency, Coppers, returns as a global one for ManiaPlanet called, fittingly, Planets. And the bad news? If you can believe it, there isn't any bad news. Despite selling out to one of the biggest publishers in the world and launching at a time of DLC ripoffs and micropayment madness, Nadeo has stayed true to the principle that once you've bought one ManiaPlanet title, you won't have to spend a penny until the next one. Even suggestions that it charge for virtual top-ups were dismissed, though there's thinking to be done, it admits, if players start charging exorbitant rates for their most ambitious *ShootMania* Paks.

else, then cataclysm: a flurry of changes reduces it to almost nothing, the bulk of its code transported into a kind of ManiaOS. It's 2007, and now three new nodes have sprouted from it. Their significance is cosmic.

One of them is of course *TrackMania 2*, which in the second half of this year will launch as *TrackMania 2: Canyon*, a back-to-basics refresh of the *TrackMania* timeline. The second is *ShootMania*, an FPS construction kit based on the same principles, the same intuitive editor and the same essential code. That's under heavy development as *TrackMania 2* nears completion, but should arrive sooner rather than later as *ShootMania: Storm*. The third, *QuestMania*, is an RPG maker for which it's still early days. The subject of speculation for some time now, these games are collectively known as ManiaPlanet.

Castelnerac wastes little time on introductions. "I couldn't explain this to Ubisoft in one slide so I've had to use two," he explains, sounding exceptionally French as he does so. "One is geography lesson, the other: 'istory lesson." The first is a pie chart based on some research he conducted via Xfire, the multiplayer instant messenger and game browser. It's split into the three basic slices of gamer loyalty: FPS, RPG and 'other'. The history lesson, just as straightforward, takes the form of a timeline which reads: '2D. 3D. Online. Online 2.0'.

Nadeo's interpretation of the '2.0' bit is known only too well by the six million registered *TrackMania* players because it essentially refers to them. Left to enjoy an organic growth based on a wealth of secure building blocks and tools, the game's community has come to echo everything that 'web 2.0' stands for. TMTube, its video site, uses much the same rating system as YouTube to organise over 12,000 videos, ranging from action movies to tutorials on making dirty water. The *TrackMania* clients, those backward-compatible updates which stick religiously to the same concepts and interface, regularly summon a web browser to visit innumerable homepages, storefronts and hubs. Based largely in eastern Europe, their society of users organises, promotes, polices and encourages not just its own evolution, but that of the game itself. Such is its understanding of the platform's rules and freedoms that Nadeo barely has to take part.

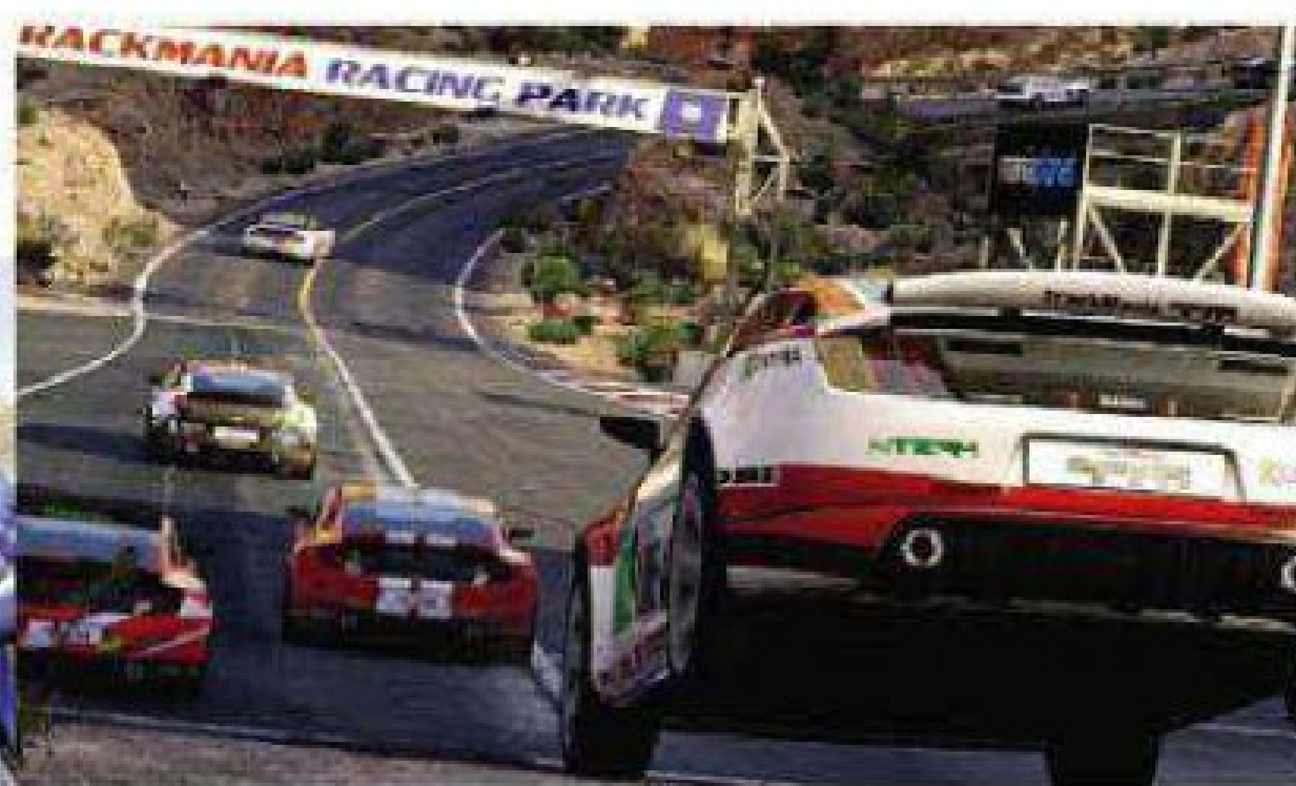
"When you go online, you're not playing a small game from a team that made it two years ago," says Castelnerac. "You are playing the game of passionate people who are playing it. We're not a game maker, we're an instrument maker. It's like piano: you play and listen and change and play and listen and so forth."

Reiterating what he said in **E**214's 'The Making Of… *Trackmania*' article, he describes the game's evolution as "a decade of adventure", which, with ManiaPlanet, will begin largely anew. And he really means it, too. While ManiaOS's presentation boldly and beautifully updates everything, powering lighting and detail that stands toe-to-toe with the latest triple-A titles, *TrackMania 2: Canyon* offers a genuine refresh. The years have turned Castelnerac's belief in purity into an obsession, and the sequel actually strips away more features than it adds.

"Sometimes we have to show new features because there's nothing else," he advises. "So be warned: there are no new features in *TrackMania 2* except damage." There are, in fact, no modes at all besides the bread-and-butter of races and time trials. "It's great to have features, like in *Civilization* where it gets more complicated over time. I like to discover new things. But there's a quote: 'Something is perfect not when you can't add anything more, but when you can't *remove* anything more'. When we made *TrackMania Sunrise*, our publisher said: 'What's with all the new modes?' We don't care about new modes; the player can create those. As a gamer, I want to buy a racing game, a fun challenge that's as pure and as good as possible."

And puzzle mode? "I have a statistic about that:

With pin-sharp textures and a blistering framerate, *TrackMania 2* is definitely a PC game. What's more, it's one built to render all the kinds of concrete spaghetti its more audacious fans might design



0.8 per cent of people think it's their favourite mode. We started *TrackMania* with two modes: Puzzle and Racing. And we ended up with Stunts, Platform, Puzzle, Survival… all of these modes. We've seen that people haven't used Puzzle, haven't beaten all the puzzles. So we decided that *TrackMania Forever* is a great puzzle game – there are 1,000 blocks that are better suited to puzzles, and there are Puzzle campaigns. There's your Puzzle."

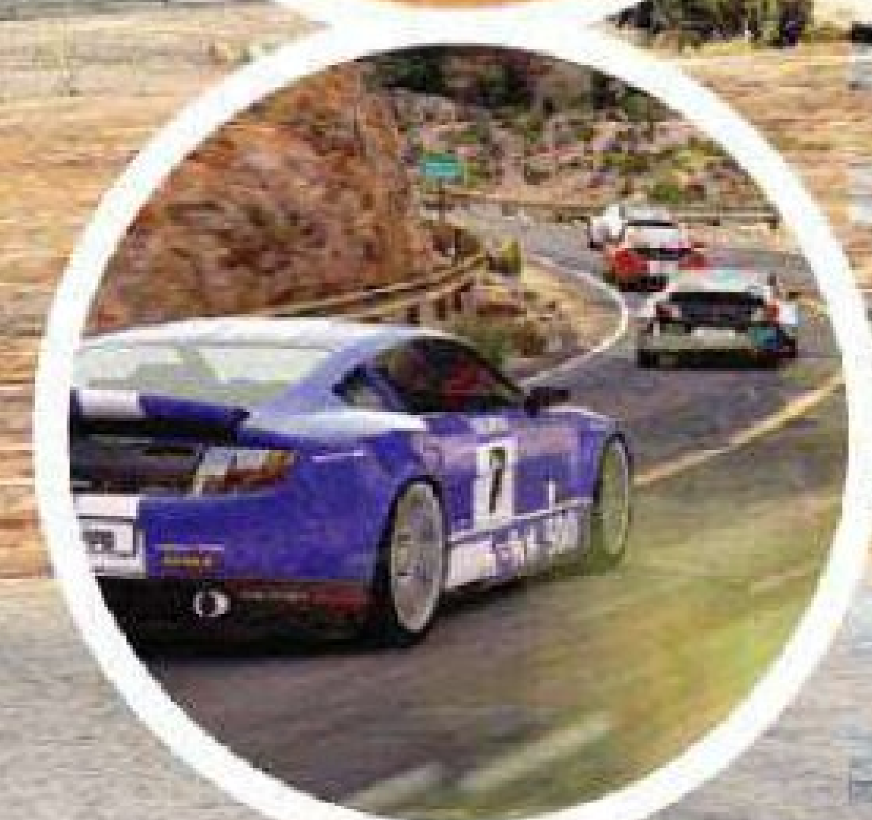
Perhaps the biggest departure in *TrackMania 2*, then, is that the building blocks of creation have changed. They're more realistic now – flatter and built for speed. There are 250 versus the 50 or so of the first game, loyal to a masterfully rebuilt handling model. "I thought we'd have the [handling] model within a day, just like the first *TrackMania*," says Castelnerac, "but it was a fight. It took a year for *TrackMania 2*. The space for that feeling is really wide: you've got the crazy area and the realistic area, and we just have to be somewhere in between. But even just a month ago I was still tweaking the parameters."



Florent Castelnerac (above) and his 14 colleagues bring expertise and stability to a project that can be both simple and complex. Nadeo brings an outsider's perspective to genres of entrenched, often hackneyed ideas









TrackMania currently holds the world record for the largest number of cars in an online race, its netcode handling 250 with relative ease. But what about *ShootMania*? Castelnerac is unsure, though he's confident a game could handle at least 16, probably 32, and in all likelihood more



In the time it's taken Castelnerac to utter these words, he's hopped from the new carousel view of the different ManiaPlanet titles down into *TrackMania 2: Canyon*, into the map selection and out on to the road with nary a loading screen in between. His fingers sit atop the familiar cursor key control scheme (though he prefers to rebind the brake to Ctrl) and have their way with a more detailed and believable default car. It rocks and bucks with the analogue inputs, each keypress triggering a noticeable exchange of real-world physics. Through doughnuts and emergency stops, the vehicle's attitude is never quite the same from one second to the next.

Castelnerac notes: "You want to appeal to a lot of people, but in the meantime you're creating an intimidating game: realistic, nervous, going fast. So a lot of the time I was putting the camera up close to the car and telling myself: 'No, this is getting too hardcore'." Now it's just exciting, with a feel that's more like being in the back seat than following on some distant rail. The canyon tracks, meanwhile, stick with the theme, carving and coiling around the terrain with the free-spirited feel of a *Rollercoaster Tycoon*. And the lighting's radiosity, calculated in the editor and then baked into the track itself, enables players across the hardware spectrum to enjoy the exact same experience at peak performance.

And here, remarkably, we find ourselves coming to the end of a presentation we'd assumed was just getting started. That's it for *TrackMania 2: Canyon*, basis of a new era of crazy and beautiful designs and inventions. We're going to have a look at *ShootMania*, and its potential is astronomical.

"With a lot of shooters you can build a map, and you get all the tools that requires," says Castelnerac. "But our question was: is it important to have the ability to create a map, or to have a nearly infinite number of maps and the accessibility for people to create them quickly? I'm not necessarily a graphics artist with complex tools, so the question is: can I create something that's different and fun for other people?"

We're not a game maker, we're an instrument maker. It's like piano: you play and listen and change"

What you realise very quickly about *ShootMania*, which from a functional perspective feels uncannily similar to its sibling, is that the most important thing about Nadeo is the otherness of Castelnerac himself. The pile of books on his desk, the occasional movie poster on the studio wall, the admission that his new mouse and keyboard make him "more like a gamer": this is not a man brought up on games of any kind, and in his company nothing about the FPS is sacrosanct.

So it is that *ShootMania* casually discards some of the foremost conventions of the genre: gun model (the bullets are just energy puffs fired from the camera), soldiery, blood and the pretexts of war. It's the most pared-down shooter imaginable – and if it sounds like something a Jonathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel might hack together for *Quake* competition play, maybe there's something to that. Castelnerac has recently cultivated an obsession with the history of id Software.

TrackMania, remember, is far and away the leading racing game for

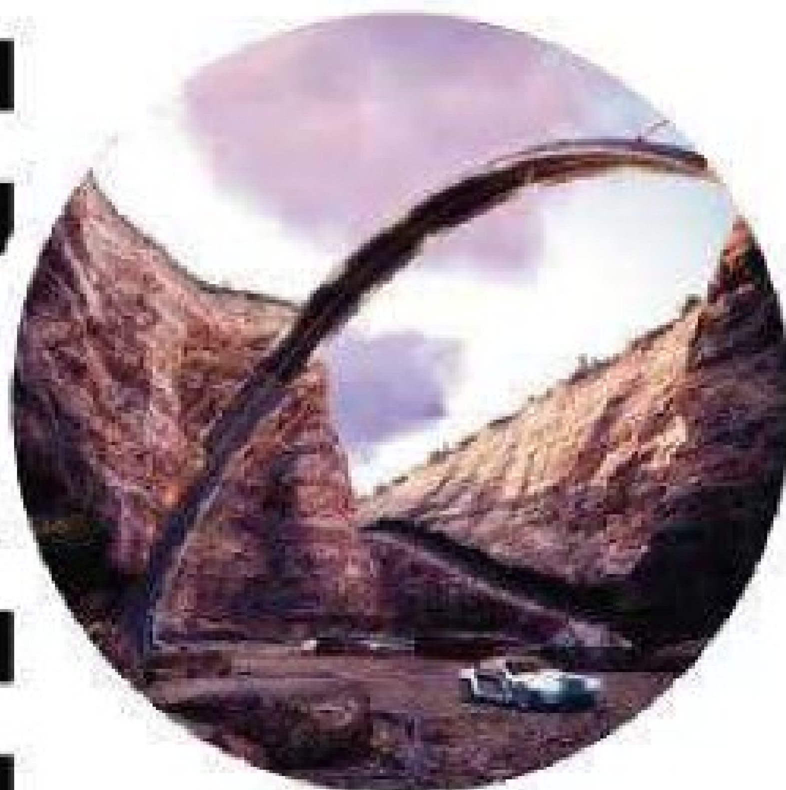


THE NOTORIOUS DRM

First Starforce, now Ubisoft. If ever there was a game that knew the pros and cons (and heroes and villains) of DRM, it's this one. Being one of few developers to (eventually) satisfy players, publishers and e-sports organisers with its online security, Nadeo has a lot to lose by letting its guard down here – and a fair bit to lose if it puts it up too far. Understandably, then, the studio's in no hurry to tell us anything at all about its plans for ManiaPlanet, citing Valve as an exemplar of keeping schtum. Having relaxed the controversial 'always-on' DRM debuted in *Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft will no doubt have a few ideas of its own.

These are artistic screenshots, taken from unplayable angles and rendered above the intended resolution. The replay toolset is currently a mixed bag, but expect Nadeo to smooth things out before launch







The Ubisoft hoarding in the top screenshot is not an uncommon sight around *TrackMania 2*, the logo appearing on cars and elsewhere. It'll be interesting to see how freely it surrenders that presence if a track designer demands it

professional e-sports, a fact that speaks of the versatility of its editor, the stability of its rules and the security of its client-server relationship. The same ambitions are evident in *ShootMania* – this is where Ubisoft's interest in Nadeo becomes obvious – and success, believes Castelnerac, is once again a matter of purity.

"We've tried to make it spectator friendly, e-sport friendly, competition friendly. That's really interesting because today it's *Counter-Strike*, which is ten years old. I won't say they have problems but there are obvious things – terrorism and counter-terrorism, shooting people and so forth – and for sponsors and TV broadcasts, the good spirit of sport is being damaged by this. So we're trying to bring a game that's compatible with this environment. This is our expertise in *TrackMania* over the years: dedicated servers, tools to spectate and all the other



"In ShootMania we want to play a throwaway map: let's have five or ten minutes with it and then find another"

stuff we develop to make the game playable in competition. *Call Of Duty*, for example: every year they release new gameplay with new rules, the servers change – sometimes they even forget dedicated servers. Our dedicated server manager has seen improvements over the years thanks to the community, an open-source framework. I met the founder of the Electronic Sports World Cup, and for him the success of *ShootMania* was support. We're going to improve this game and keep it stable. It's like tennis or football. If you improve the ball, the racquet, every year, it's more difficult."

A great ambition, then, but no greater a part of the *ShootMania* concept than it has been in *TrackMania*. 'Serious' competition maps can of course be assembled using the smaller 8x8m building blocks of its editor – *TrackMania*'s are 64x64m – and the ability to blend scenery more effectively should avoid the terraced 'cake' scenery of Nadeo's racer. But when Castelnerac calls this "the YouTube of the FPS", he knows what that entails.

"I'd say it's the difference between literature and YouTube. On YouTube you've got lots of crazy videos you can watch and you don't watch them twice. On a traditional shooter you're looking for a more serious map that can continue over time – that you'll be playing in ten years' time. In *ShootMania* we want to play a throwaway map: let's have five or ten minutes with this one and then find another idea. We've made more than 100 maps so far; that's what's enjoyable."

TrackMania fans are no strangers to this kind of map. Nicknamed 'LOL maps' by the community, they prove the infinite monkey theorem right – only here it's more like the 'millions of eastern Europeans theorem': give enough of them a fairly basic toolset and they will, amid an awful lot of crap, create the racing game equivalent of Shakespeare. And as we dip in and out of Nadeo's first *ShootMania* creations, we're immediately struck by its power to reinvent so many of the shooter genre's conventions that players take for granted.

Dubbed "a dynamics generator" at one point during the day (about the time when Ubisoft's marketing men spontaneously combust), the game almost demands that you do something unique and

interesting with the format, even if it's also quite demented. One of Nadeo's maps, The Butcher Place, is a CTF game in which both teams' bases are exactly eight metres apart, leading to carnage whenever someone tries to stick a flag in one. Another sees players scramble along a precipitous ledge towards checkpoints while a central gun emplacement makes mincemeat out of them. Yet another, Trapped Up, is a tower-defence game in which the defenders' respawn rate drops with time, ensuring eventual victory for the enemy.

"In a shooter, when you go online with people who have been playing for years, you soon realise that you need to learn all the maps, in three dimensions," says Castelnerac. "It's really complicated for the mind to build that mental picture when the maps are so serious. It's like literature – it's harder to grab. And when you start to do this you're saying to everybody: 'You have to *learn* when you come online'. But I know that two years from now, if I go online to play *ShootMania*, I'll know the map as much as everyone else. This is really important."

The game works in a wide area, he continues, existing "somewhere in between" the extremes of "crazy and realistic". In *TrackMania* the outskirts of that area have seen such minor miracles as RPG Unlimited, a site dedicated to adventure-game tracks which can take an hour and a half to play. Narratives, voiceovers, cutscenes and missions are not uncommon in today's tracks, and they tirelessly test the game's boundaries, threatening not just to break it but do something almost as bad: bloat it. It's id



Software that can once again take credit for ManiaPlanet's solution: a Pak editor.

For the most adventurous *ShootManiac*, building a Pak turns a complex FPS – new models and textures, perhaps, with advanced custom scripts, rulesets and who knows what else – into a one-click download which sits neatly on the title screen alongside Nadeo's official content. Once selected, its leaderboards and server browser are unique to that particular game, keeping content safely apart from the dependencies of other maps and modes.

So, how distinct can these creations be? Could you, for example, add AI behaviours or impose a custom FOV? "Or will you be able to change the speed of the guy walking in *ShootMania*?" offers Castelnerac, picking up on our line of questioning. "For me, it's very dangerous. If you have all your hardcore community wanting to go faster and faster, they'll all be playing that Pak and, when you go online, there won't be that mix of people playing together. You won't have that common ground. That was the problem with Formula One. FOV is probably only a personal setting like mouse sensitivity, so it'll probably fall in that category from day one. But we won't have the FOV at 55 [tight, like a console FPS] or something – it'll have a historically PC [wider for greater spatial awareness] value."

As for AI: "That tends to mean very little 'I' and very big 'A'. In a way I'm against artificial intelligence because it has its limits and it's not pure for me. It will always be flawed. But maybe the creativeness of things like the Atlantis map [one of the most audacious *TrackMania* 'adventures'] will create stuff with characters or – and this is what we're working on at the moment – a map in multiplayer where it's 20 against the 'ghost', let's say. I've seen *Red Dead Redemption*, where you go along the river and a guy gets out of the rocks and shoots at you. This is scripted AI, and with our scripting language that should be possible.

"We build everything to be shared between players: a brick, servers, maps, everything. If I do a behaviour, I can give you the behaviour. It has to be like that. A programmer can use the script to provide what anyone else can download."

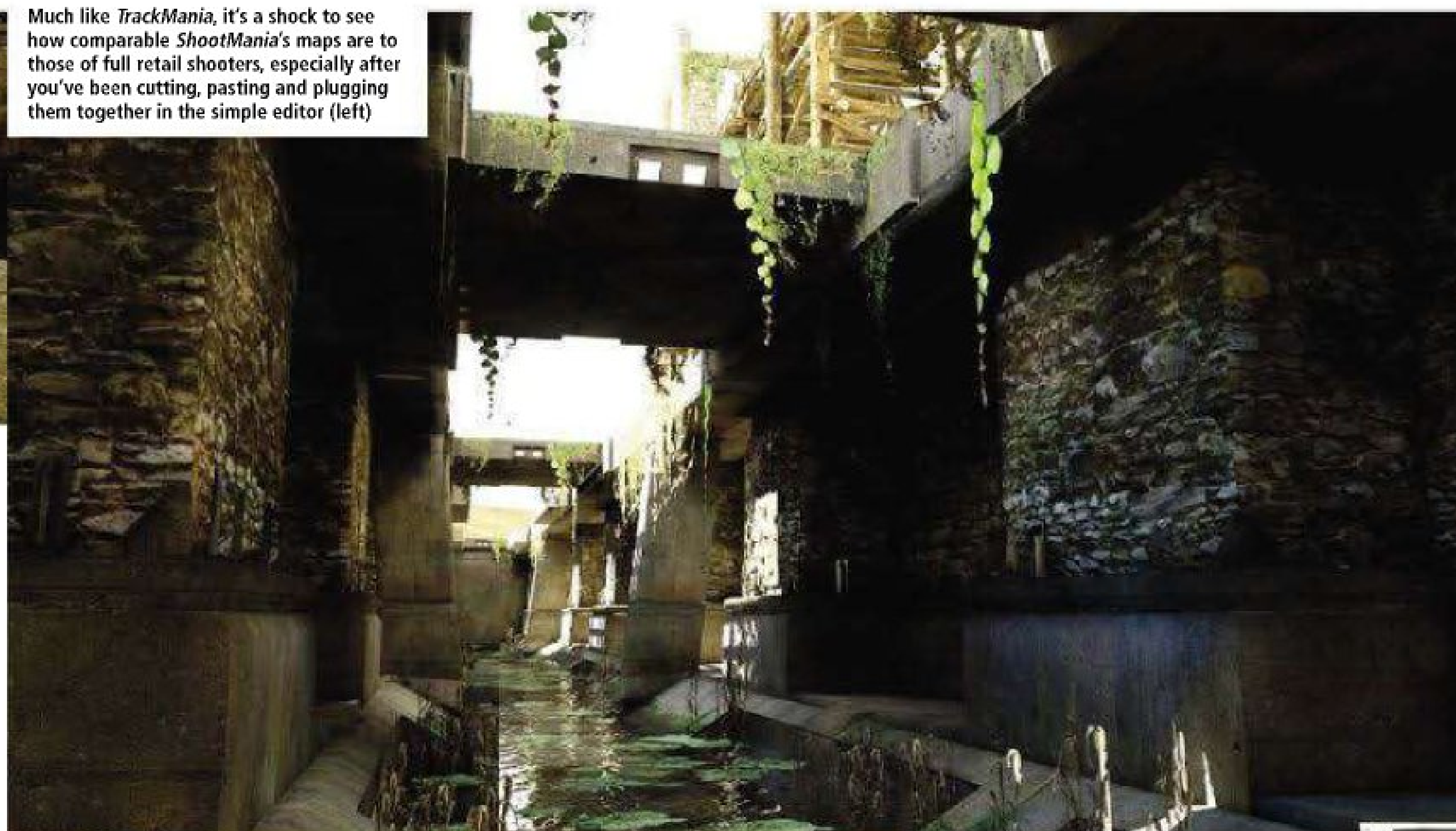
With no real mention of *QuestMania* at this late point in the afternoon, it's clear there isn't a great deal to say. Nadeo is tackling ManiaPlanet in sequence, and all it'll reveal of its RPG maker are things you can probably work out for yourself. "It's kind of obvious," says Castelnerac. "*TrackMania* is about solo skill, like solo sport. *ShootMania* is about battle skill – it sums up everything you've seen in the history of skill-based games. And *QuestMania* is on the other side of the fence, more time-based, about events, consequences and progress." It is, he adds, less *Elder Scrolls* than a paper-based Dungeons & Dragons or Shadowrun, where after a few hours of play you still have no idea what could happen.

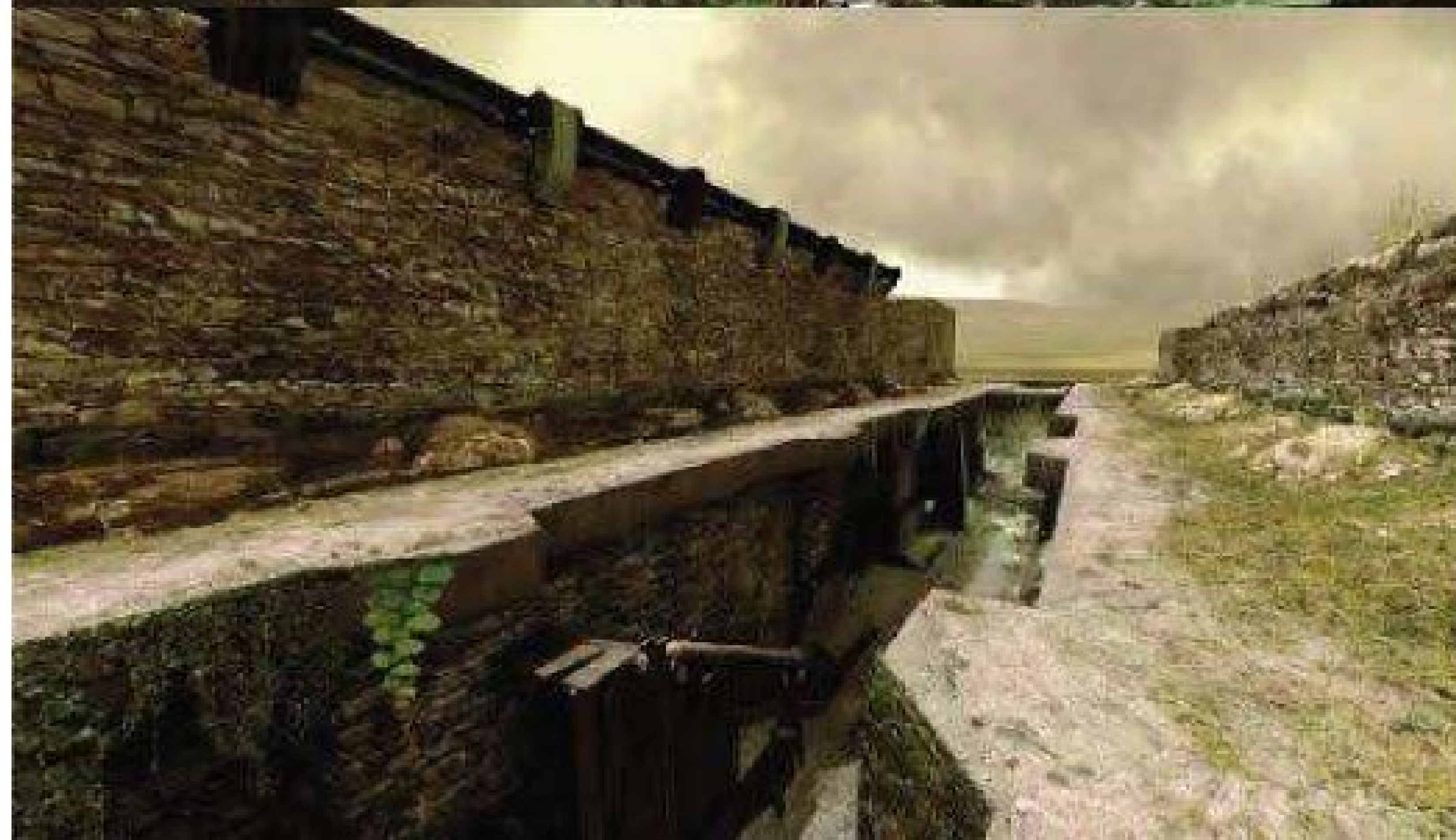
Nadeo, furthermore, will have no idea, making this business as usual for what is, to no small degree, a developer specialising in user-generated content. Still a game of building blocks, the story of ManiaPlanet hinges equally on destruction; strip away the cars, the tracks, almost a decade's worth of content and even the genre, and the game remains instantly recognisable. It's not even about tools and interfaces, but about something that feels more endangered than ever: mutual respect between makers and players. And that dynamic, Castelnerac would agree, is a feat of simplicity in itself.

ACTION SCRIPT

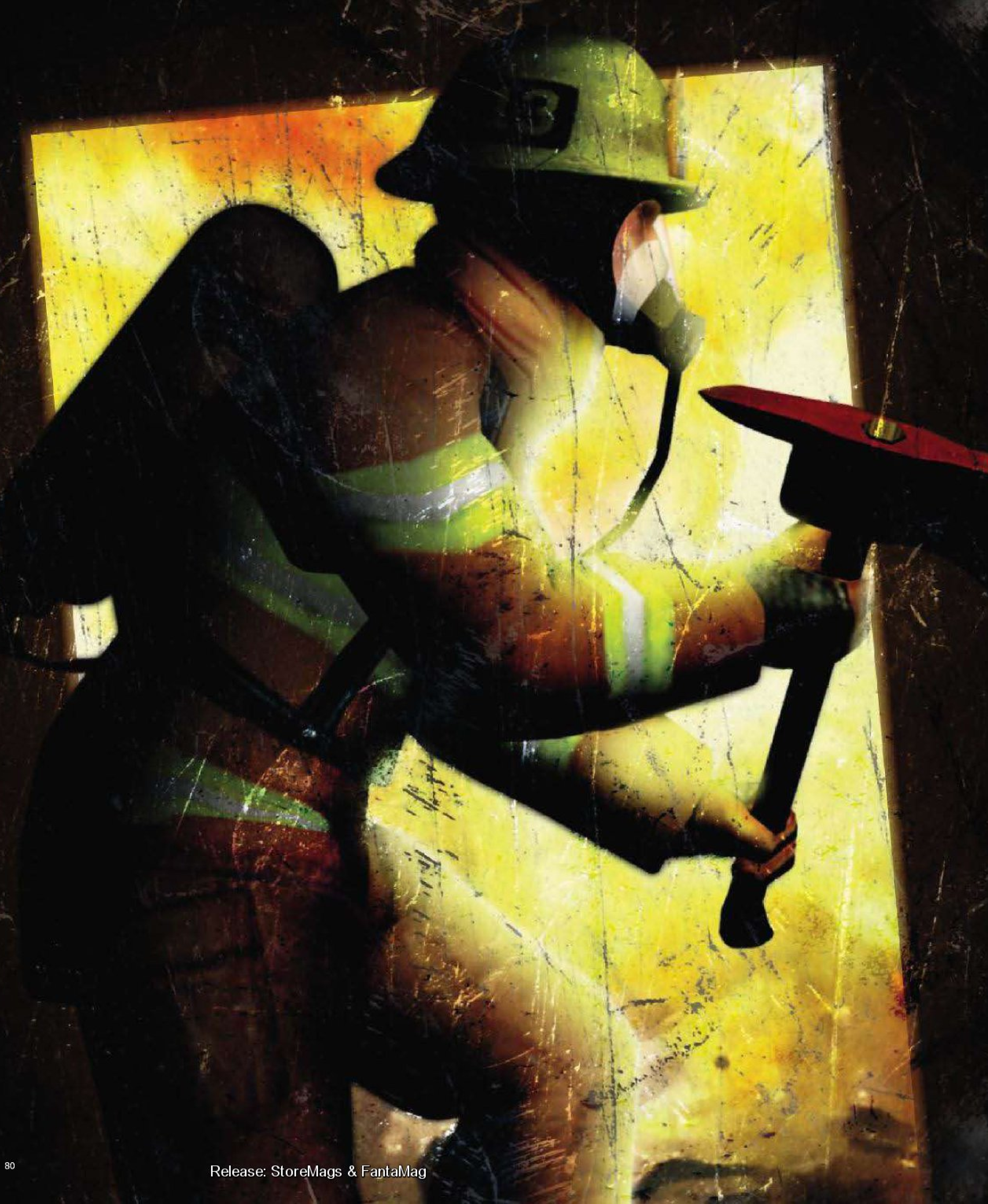
One of the most powerful features of the *ShootMania* studio, declares Castelnerac, is that creators can embed densely scripted objects in their maps. Great for competition play, these could include interactive billboards – think *Doom 3* – with info regarding fellow competitors, map layout or tournament rankings. *ShootMania* handles any scripting entirely in the studio environment, exporting it as a module which can be uploaded, 'monetised', bought and integrated with just a few mouse clicks. There's no word yet on whether the workarounds familiar to *TrackMania*, where files can be downloaded from outside the system and simply copied into the game's file structure, will be tolerated again here.

Much like *TrackMania*, it's a shock to see how comparable *ShootMania*'s maps are to those of full retail shooters, especially after you've been cutting, pasting and plugging them together in the simple editor (left)





The light-baking system which has fast become a talking point of *TM2* is even more important in *ShootMania*, says Castelnerac, since the ability to see the same light and shadow is vital to an even playing field. The *ShootMania* screenshots here are conceptual, and aren't representative of the final quality of the interface or game



A MATTER OF LIFE & DEATH

THE TALE OF EPICENTER STUDIOS' BRIEF RISE AND RAPID FALL EXPOSES THE PERSONAL STRUGGLE BEHIND THE GAMES WE PLAY

Epicenter Studios began with the dream of independence and a better way of working. It closed with the realisation that sometimes no amount of will, imagination or technical ability can save you in this particular industry. The thwarted passion and high personal stakes are a common story in game development, yet the business's perils often go unheard: for every game developer whose demise has hit the headlines, just as many – like Epicenter itself – are swallowed by the churning waters before they ever have a chance to make a name for themselves.

Nathaniel McClure still vividly remembers the moment he knew he had to strike out on his own. It was late 2006, just before dawn one morning at Activision headquarters in Santa Monica, California. A makeshift bed of cushions stolen from the couches in the lobby sat on the floor nearby. There were red marks on his face, given to him by his own computer keyboard after he collapsed from exhaustion in his office cubicle. The game's next build was held up in delivery and he was the sole person left in the office.

"I just asked myself: 'How does this make sense?'" McClure recalls. He decided he had to take control of his own future. If he was going to work this hard, he reasoned, it should be on something from which he could harvest the rewards, too. After that incident McClure and a former colleague, **Bryan Jury**, began to talk in earnest about forming their own studio. It was clear that the pair needed a single concept – something they could believe in strongly enough to get them to quit their full-time jobs and really take the startup plunge.

One day, Jury proposed what he thought might be the idea they were looking for: imagine what a really good game about being a firefighter could be, he said.

Imagine a *Call Of Duty*-style take on the subject matter of Backdraft – a game that took the scripted action set-piece techniques pioneered by modern firstperson shooters and applied them to something other than ceaseless violence. Imagine an intense, action-oriented game with high production values in which the goal was not to kill, but to save lives instead.

After all, firefighters aren't genetically engineered supersoldiers or magic users imbued with the power of ancient spirits. They're real people – real heroes who regularly put their lives on the line for others. Dozens of feature films have been made about them, but the subject seemed ripe for a high-quality treatment in game form too. Previous efforts in the genre were few and far between, and most of those fell flat for one reason or another. Jury knew they could do better.

"WE HAD GAME DESIGN DOCUMENTS, BUSINESS PLANS… WHAT WE DIDN'T HAVE WAS A GAME YOU COULD PLAY"

In keeping with the massmarket, family-friendly appeal of the subject matter, Jury proposed that the game should be targeted at the Wii market. At the time, Nintendo's console had just taken the market by storm and the industry by surprise. As stores struggled to keep the hardware in stock, publishers were scrambling to line up content for the device, stung by shareholder criticism for failing to predict or prepare for this 'next big thing'. The firefighter game pitch, it seemed to Jury and McClure, offered exactly what the market was craving at exactly the right time.

Jury and McClure put their chips on the table and founded Epicenter Studios in March 2007 – the name a tongue-in-cheek recognition of the company's location in Southern California. Their hopes were high, having decided on an ideal structure: if they could sign the firefighter game and another one at the same time, Epicenter could operate as a two-team studio. The two projects would give them a safety net if cash came up short on one; the second team could work on movie licences or other work-for-hire projects while the first concentrated on its marquee title.

Working through their industry connections, the pair were able to get in the door at most of the major publishers without much trouble. To their surprise, however, there wasn't much to discuss. "This was our first real rookie mistake," McClure recalls. "We'd spent a lot of time on documents – game design documents, business plans, P&Ls [profit and loss statements], studio prospectus, you name it. What we didn't have was a game you could play."

To fix it, McClure was able to find a seed investor who agreed to fund the company just enough to create a prototype. The founders recruited some former colleagues to help them and, over the next five weeks, hammered together a full proof-of-concept demo. The prototype was, by all accounts, out of the ordinary. It included dynamic fire, scripted events and Wii controller actions. Most important of all, it clearly communicated the vision of the game. Now, publishers could look at the demo and instantly grasp what Epicenter was proposing to make. Potential partners began asking the right questions: when can you get this done? How much money would you need? The game was starting to feel like something real.

Despite the demo, however, the team still faced an uphill battle. For one thing, it was a brand new company, a fact that caused publishers to shy away. Additionally, there was the asking price. Jury and McClure's time working on blockbusters had coloured their perception of how much a game should cost to make. They had been asking for $5,000,000 – a drop in the ocean compared to the kinds of productions they regularly saw at their former employer. But the amount made the people they spoke to baulk. This is the Wii market, they would say, where titles like *Carnival Games* could be made for a less than a tenth of that price and were selling millions of copies.

After multiple rounds of meetings, demos, discussions, and negotiations, the firefighter game remained unsigned. Every piece of feedback indicated they were in possession a good idea. But the part that mattered most – closing the deal – still eluded them.

studio for a potential deal on an unrelated game. "We had the visit all day, everything was going well, and when we were done we opened up the *Firefighter* demo and showed it to him, almost as an afterthought," Jury remembers. "Like: 'Hey, here's this other thing we happen to have'. He saw it and decided he wanted to do the firefighting game instead."

There was a complication, however. This particular publisher couldn't give them the cash they'd initially sought – in fact, nothing close. The offer hewed closely to the Wii strategy that most publishers had at the time: $500,000.

The founders mulled it over: since *Critter Round-Up* had gone out the door, they needed to close a new deal soon. But could they make something that they believed in for a mere tenth of the amount they had initially sought? When it came down to the reality of the situation, they didn't have much of a choice. Everyone they spoke to

THE ENTIRE COMPANY WENT TO FIRE HOUSES, TRIED ON THE FIRE SUITS, WATCHED DRILLS, BACKDRAFT, DOCUMENTARIES GALORE"

With their main pitch stalling, Jury and McClure cast around for other opportunities. Towards the end of 2007, publishers were eyeing up Nintendo's new WiiWare service, set to launch the next year. It was the right time and place for Epicenter to take advantage of the opportunity, but to make it work, fast action was needed.

Jury drew up some plans for a simple game that vaguely recalled the classic arcade title *Qix*: build walls and don't get touched while doing so. He transposed the abstract lines and squares into a cartoon farm setting, where a hapless rancher must segregate all of the creatures in his field by species. Though it was tiny, *Critter Round-Up* (renamed *Saku Saku Animal Panic* for its Japanese launch) helped prove the studio's ability to ship something as a team under the constraints of time and money.

Jury and McClure continued to seek out more business – writing pitches, bidding on work, and hoping something would stick. One day, a publishing executive visited the

had already rejected them at the higher proposed budget. If they wanted to make this game at all, they would need to make it for whatever someone was willing to pay for it. Jury and McClure accepted the deal.

The team immersed itself in firefighter culture. "The entire company went to fire houses, tried on the fire suits, watched fire drills, Backdraft, Rescue Me, firefighter documentaries galore," says **Tony Dormanesh**, a designer who worked on the prototype and who eventually became the full game's lead designer. "I even went to shoot a flamethrower. We absorbed as much as we could. I bought a real firefighter's training book, and that thing was like our bible."

A common thread through the firefighter stories was how fire often seemed to have a mind of its own: moving in unpredictable ways, sometimes almost taunting the humans battling against it. The team latched on to this idea and tried to capture it in the game through a system



Nathaniel McClure, Epicenter co-founder



Bryan Jury, Epicenter co-founder

dubbed 'Thinking Fire'. With Thinking Fire, a design document states, "blazes will seem almost alive as they not only attack structures, potential victims and firefighters, but also cause unexpected changes to the environments that will suddenly alter the player's options and strategies".

Properly conveying the scale of these fires – of being inside of a warehouse as it goes up in flames, for example – required the individual tracking of thousands of dynamic elements, all of which were hitting the Wii CPU. "There are scenes with over 12,000 fire entities in them," Jury says. "That we got it all working is pretty incredible."

Unfortunately, *Firefighter*'s technical underpinnings were only any good if you knew about them. At the surface level, the game struggled to be competitive visually. Every time the team released screenshots, someone was there to criticise the graphics.

"At any given time, we had to have levels that would support the possibility of being completely filled with fire, smoke, steam, sparks and so on," explains **Scott Fabianek**, Epicenter's art director. "The last thing we wanted was to have the framerate drop to nothing, so we had to build while taking into consideration the most intense of all possible scenarios."

Arguably, *Firefighter*'s scope was also too ambitious. There were seven main characters and over 20 civilian models. Each fire sequence took place in a totally different area – there was a mall full of diverse shops and a cinema, a natural history museum full of exhibits, and an amusement park with rides and attractions. The responsibility for this huge list of assets fell to a tiny art team. It was a simply case of "not enough time, not enough people, not enough budget," Fabianek says.



CHARITY OF FIRE

During research for *Real Heroes: Firefighter*, the team discovered several studies that showed firefighters face a significantly increased risk of certain types of cancer over other types of workers. This is generally thought to be due to the many dangerous chemicals that firefighters may be exposed to in the line of their work, including benzene, soot, styrene and diesel engine exhaust. Inspired by the stories of real sacrifice around which they were building a videogame, Jury and McClure formed a relationship with the Firefighter Cancer Support Network, a US charitable organisation that provides counselling and cancer awareness information to firefighters and their families. A portion of the proceeds of *Real Heroes: Firefighter* was donated to the FCSN, and there are some prominently visible billboards that 'advertise' the group in the game.

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Despite these issues, production on *Firefighter* was still proceeding relatively smoothly when the team abruptly hit a much larger bump in the road. In the autumn of 2008, the global economy began a dizzying freefall, sparked by the American sub-prime mortgage crisis. As the effects rippled throughout the business world, the supply of money began to dry up. The various parties that had been funding the creation of *Firefighter* suddenly experienced problems of their own.

The company had been living hand-to-mouth on periodic payments for milestone deliveries. To keep the game in production, Jury and McClure began to bridge the shortfall by taking out personal credit and applying it to the game. The risk, they felt, would be manageable – after all, the payments were owed to them and would be coming eventually. They just needed to survive the pain in the short term in order to earn the longer-term payoff.

In the meantime, McClure frantically pursued other side deals in order to keep the company going. One was a console port of a PC game, which yielded a meagre amount of profit; that money was immediately plunged back into the development of *Firefighter*. He also kicked off another WiiWare project, but the hastiness of the design combined with his inability to devote his full attention to it resulted in a strained development process; that game was eventually cancelled.

Firefighter was able to soldier onwards without much interruption, however, and in the late summer of 2009, *Real Heroes: Firefighter* finally shipped to retailers across the US. The team gathered to marvel at the sight of their very own game in retail shrink-wrap, complete with the street date sticker. The feeling of triumph was extended when the first reviews began to roll in. In some circles, a 70 Metacritic average is seen as a kiss of death, but the Epicenter team thought of their 7/10 review scores as victories against games that cost 20 or 30 times their own budget. It was a validation of what they had worked so hard to achieve.

Later, *Firefighter* would even be nominated for IGN.com's Wii Shooter Of The Year. "There was *The Conduit*, *Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles*, *Dead Space*





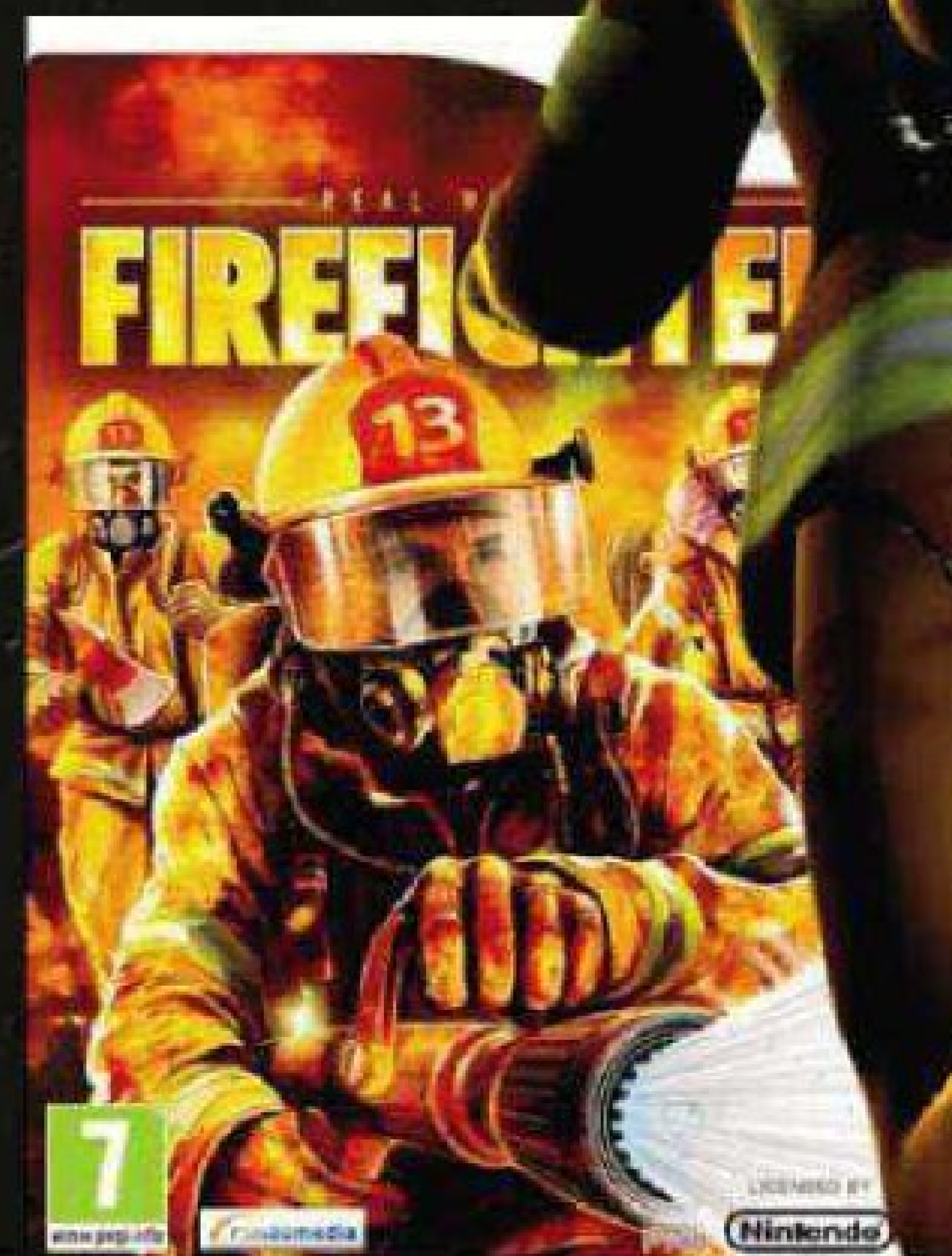
Viewed from a firstperson perspective, *Real Heroes: Firefighter* sees the player using extinguishers and hoses to fight flames



Firefighter's voice cast includes Buffy actor James Marsters and prolific videogame contributor John 'Bender' DiMaggio







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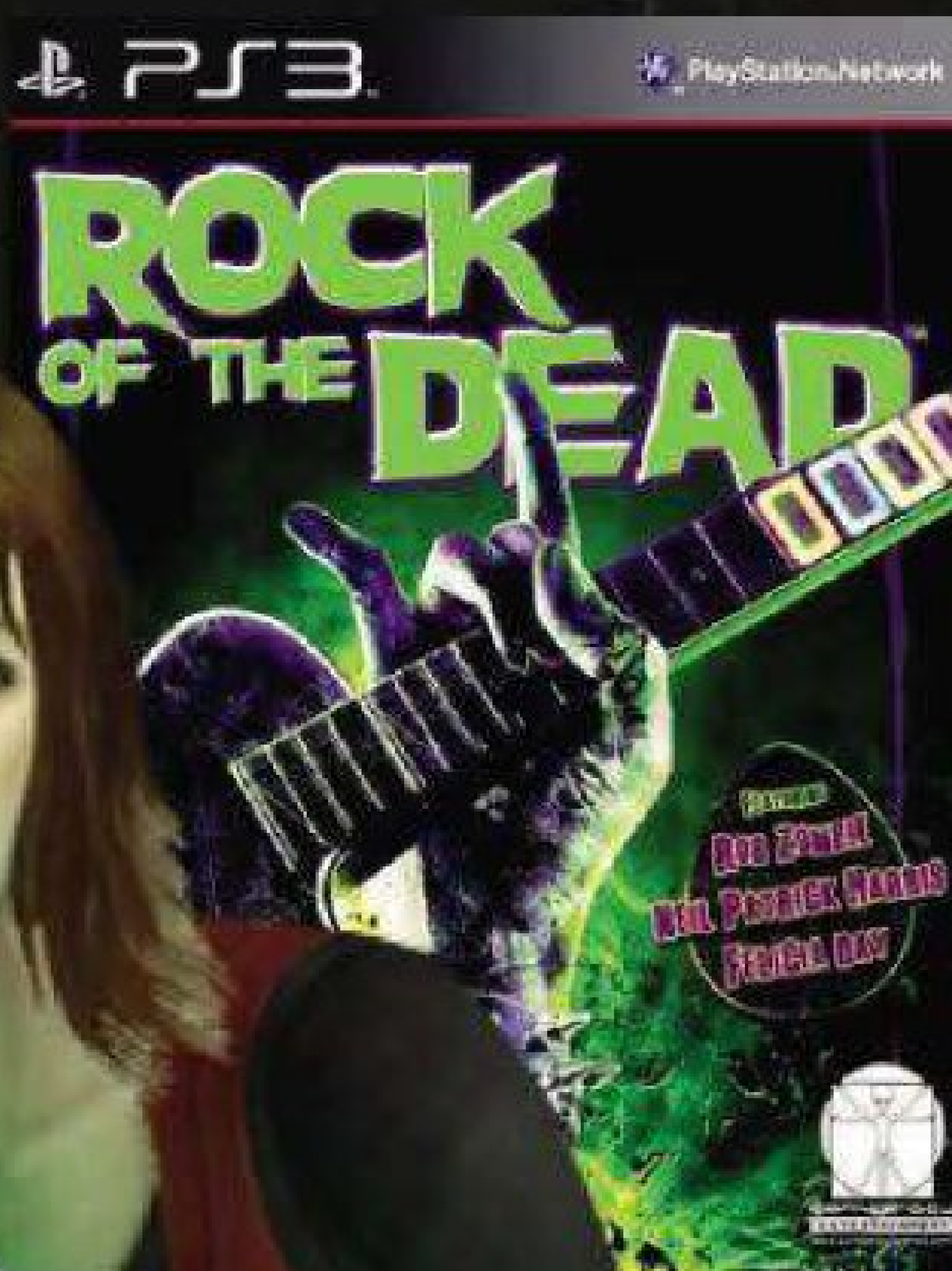
Critter Round-Up was a launch title for WiiWare in Japan, and tasks players with separating animals by species while protecting them from predators





Rock Of The Dead sees a character voiced by Neil Patrick Harris using rock music to kill zombies while searching for his girlfriend









Extraction… and us, *Firefighter*," McClure says. Feeling like underdogs, the team beamed with pride to know they had been nominated at all.

Real Heroes: Firefighter would eventually sell close to 300,000 units in the US. But Epicenter still had a long way to go to get out of the hole it was in. It got the game done – now it had to keep the lights on.

As *Firefighter* shipped, Jury had been exploring another idea on the side. It was apparent that the music game genre was on the wane, yet there were still millions of plastic guitar peripherals collecting dust in bedrooms and behind sofas. What if those could be harnessed to play a different game than *Rock Band* or *Guitar Hero*?

The result of that brainstorm was a game called *Rock Of The Dead*. The concept was simple: use your guitar to literally rock the dead back to their graves. As a campy mashup of *Guitar Hero* and Sega's cult classic *The Typing Of The Dead*, the game was an easy pitch and a deal was quickly signed.

Unfortunately, the original plan of producing it as a Wii game turned out to be unfeasible due to legal complications arising from the complex deals around guitar controller interfaces and who actually controls the rights to each component of the system. After months of legal wrangling with the involved parties, the choice was to ship on Xbox 360 and PS3 or not ship at all. The team scrambled to convert assets that had originally been intended for Wii to these new platforms without any additional time or money to re-work them.

Additionally, the game's campy-fun rock atmosphere begged for good music, but Epicenter and its partners had trouble putting together the right deal. By the time they were finally able to license Rob Zombie – a perfect fit for the game – it was too late for the team to design the levels around the music.

Finally, the cashflow was a constant struggle. Jury and McClure had already overextended their personal credit finishing *Firefighter*, so Epicenter entered into a complex funding arrangement involving multiple parties with different, sometimes conflicting, interests.

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But if Epicenter could get through *Rock Of The Dead* alive, Jury reasoned, it could survive to live another day. And what really kept him going through this difficult period was the possibility of a deal for *Firefighter 2*. The second game in the *Real Heroes: Firefighter* series would fix design problems, solve the graphics issue and introduce multiplayer co-op – capturing the teamwork that is so central to the firefighter's job.

Eager to get started, Jury began what he later describes as the worst mistake of his career. He began hiring to put together a team for *Firefighter 2*. "We were so close," he remembers. "There was a contract, we had gone through multiple revisions, everyone was ready to start; all they had to do was send it to us with their ink on it."

At that last step, however, the deal fell through. Without any money coming in, the *Firefighter 2* team simply ate into a bottom line which was not looking good. Jury was forced to let the team go and liquidate their office space. As the money situation came down to the wire, tensions between Epicenter and its partners began to rise. Each payment became a matter of life and death. Cordial business relationships started to break down. "It's like being a drug addict," McClure says. "You need that money to keep going, and you get more and more upset, and you put up with worse and worse conditions in order to get it." Even then, the amounts were only just enough to stanch the bleeding. Epicenter's finances teetered on a razor's edge.

The difficult course of *Rock Of The Dead*'s development was reflected in the final product when it finally shipped in the autumn of 2010. The game was a far cry from what it could have been – or what it needed to be in order to pull Epicenter out of its downward momentum.

"I can sort of laugh about it now, but it's still pretty painful," Jury says, smiling ruefully. "I was in an airport when the first review of *Rock Of The Dead* broke, and I pulled it up it on my cellphone. It was 1UP.com; they gave the game a rating of C+. 'That's ridiculous!' I thought. 'I can't wait until the other reviews come out and set this guy straight'. But it turned out that was one of the more charitable scores we'd be getting."

After *Rock Of The Dead*'s critical and commercial failure, the landscape ahead looked bleak. There was just one flicker of hope: Jury contacted everyone he could in a last-ditch effort to sell *Firefighter 2*.

In stark contrast to just a couple of years earlier, he was met with silence. Nobody returned his phone calls or emailed him back. "It was a weird experience," Jury remembers. "As if they had all smelled the blood in the water."

Epicenter quickly dwindled from 23 people at its maximum down to a skeleton crew of six. The partners discussed their options. Only one made sense: to end it while they still could.

"WE PICKED A BAD TIME TO START A COMPANY. WHAT IF WE HAD DONE IT A FEW YEARS LATER, AND MADE THEM DOWNLOADABLE GAMES?"

In the aftermath of the storm, Jury and McClure are still sorting through everything that happened. "It pains me to think about if things had gone a slightly different way: if *Firefighter* had gotten better marketing and distribution, if we'd gotten *Rock Of The Dead* as it was meant to be out there," Jury says. "We picked a bad time to start a company, too – what if we had done it a few years later, and made them downloadable games instead of retail games?"

Epicenter still has obligations that it must clear up in order to "make everyone happy," as McClure puts it. At the same time, there's also palpable sense of relief. "I've been able to take a breath, for once," Jury says. Since the closure, the team members have gone their various ways: McClure founded a new game studio startup near Detroit, Michigan, called Scientifically Proven Entertainment. Jury moved to Florida and joined another company called Darkside Game Studios.

None of the team members who worked on *Real Heroes: Firefighter* are quite ready to put it all behind them, however. They continue to believe in that initial idea: to let players experience exciting, set-piece acts of heroism that have nothing to do with war. "I still consider that game the highlight of my career," Dormanesh says.

Jury nods. "Plus, the responses we got from children, mothers, actual firefighters – it was just amazing," he says. "It would be a shame if the concept doesn't get another shot."

McClure, for his part, is applying the experience to his new venture. One of the biggest misses at Epicenter, he feels, was putting all of the studio's eggs in a single basket; the original vision of having two projects going at the same time simply never panned out. "It wasn't for a lack of effort, but we only ever worked with one publisher," McClure says. Another point he dwells on is how every party works on a different schedule – none of them yours. "Realistically, you have to take your timeframe and double it. Every day should be two days. Every year should be two years."



The greatest lesson of all, however, seems to be that even with a novel idea, years of experience in the business, a pedigree of big-name titles and the financial backing to develop a new IP with little interference, things can still fall apart, not from a failure of creativity or of technical ability but simply somewhere inside the machinery of day-to-day business. In an environment like that, the paths leading to life and death are just a hair's breadth from each other. As Jury says, "I learned how good it feels just to be able to say: 'We're going to survive'."

GETTING IT RIGHT

The Epicenter team told one of their firefighting advisors, Captain Bill Hines of Culver City, California, that they were aiming for a level of realism not seen in previous firefighter games. "He responded that if we wanted to be realistic, we should just paint the screen black and throw water on the player," Jury says. The team's focus on realism and commitment to getting things right earned them respect from many real firefighters, who flocked to the game's Facebook page to share stories with the game's creators. "This one comment really stuck with me," says Dormanesh. "A firefighter posted: 'I was playing the game, saw this event and thought, oh crap – I'd better remember that on my next call'. Videogames saving the world? Not quite. But still…"

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers



88 **Portal 2**
360, PC, PS3



90 **Operation Flashpoint: Red River**
360, PC, PS3

92 **Conduit 2**
WII



93 **SOCOM: Special Forces**
PS3

94 **Section 8: Prejudice**
360, PC, PS3

95 **Mortal Kombat**
360, PS3

97 **Steel Diver**
3DS

98 **Darkspore**
PC



101 **Monster Tale**
DS

102 **The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile**
360



103 **Anomaly: Warzone Earth**
IPAD, IPHONE, MAC, PC

Edge's most played

Battlefield: Bad Company 2



Ah, open fields, squabbling squadmates and our trusty XM8 – after a glut of linear shooters it's good to revisit one with a bit of freedom and character.
360, PC, PS3, EA

Far Cry 2



Inspired by Marc Canham's surging, beautiful score, we eagerly returned to the rolling savannah – then set fire to it, ourselves and a herd of unfortunate zebra too.
360, PC, PS3, UBISOFT

Fallout: New Vegas



After the desolation of the DC wastes, a visit to the neon-lit Strip was just what we needed. We hope Bethesda's creaky Gamebryo engine stays in Vegas, however.
360, PC, PS3, BETHESDA

Welcome to the unreal world
How Portal 2 builds on what went before



***Portal*'s story might be remembered for its song, cake and cube, but its real achievement is taking an artificial game environment and making a plausible world out of it**

It's hard to deny that – when they put the effort in, at least – games can tell a good story. While staunch advocates of play for play's sake may consider narrative a dead end, games like *Portal 2* and its predecessor have spun perfectly taut and twisty yarns in an interactive context.

What's all the more remarkable about the *Portal* storyline, of course, is that it's a complete retrofit. How else could the writers explain how the player winds up in a completely contrived and rigidly contained series of puzzles than have them play a character forced into a completely contrived series of puzzles? Part of the pleasure of the first *Portal*'s storyline is that – aside from being wittily scripted – it so deftly explained and contextualised almost every element of what otherwise could have been an off-puttingly abstract experience.

This doesn't mean that the 'design first, plot later' approach will always work – *Mortal Kombat*'s attempt to thread a plot around its grisly match-ups in its story mode works transparently hard to whisk the player from a fight in one arena to the next, for instance – but it's interesting to note what happens when a storyline ceases to be a convenient tool for explanation and becomes part of a game's legacy in its own right.

Portal 2's expository segments brim with personality and are perfectly choreographed, helping to ease the player's passage from one puzzle to the next, but its predecessor had no need for them. In *Portal*, GLaDOS might have been a sinister, blackly comic and fascinating villain, but she was first and foremost a means to an end – a way of answering players' questions about what on Earth they were doing in such a bizarre, deserted, yet animatedly hostile place. This time around, she's a star, and she gets her moments in the limelight to prove it.

Why shouldn't she? It's hard to deny the appeal of witty dialogue – whatever the medium – and if *Portal 2* does foreground its narrative more than the first game, then the first game earned it the right to do so. A videogame story can have its twists, its shocks and its star turns, but *Portal*'s power came not from these, but from justifying its weird, contrived and utterly gamey world in the first place. 

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



PORTAL 2

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED), PS3
DEVELOPER: VALVE PUBLISHER: EA
RELEASE: OUT NOW PREVIOUSLY IN: E217, E221, E225



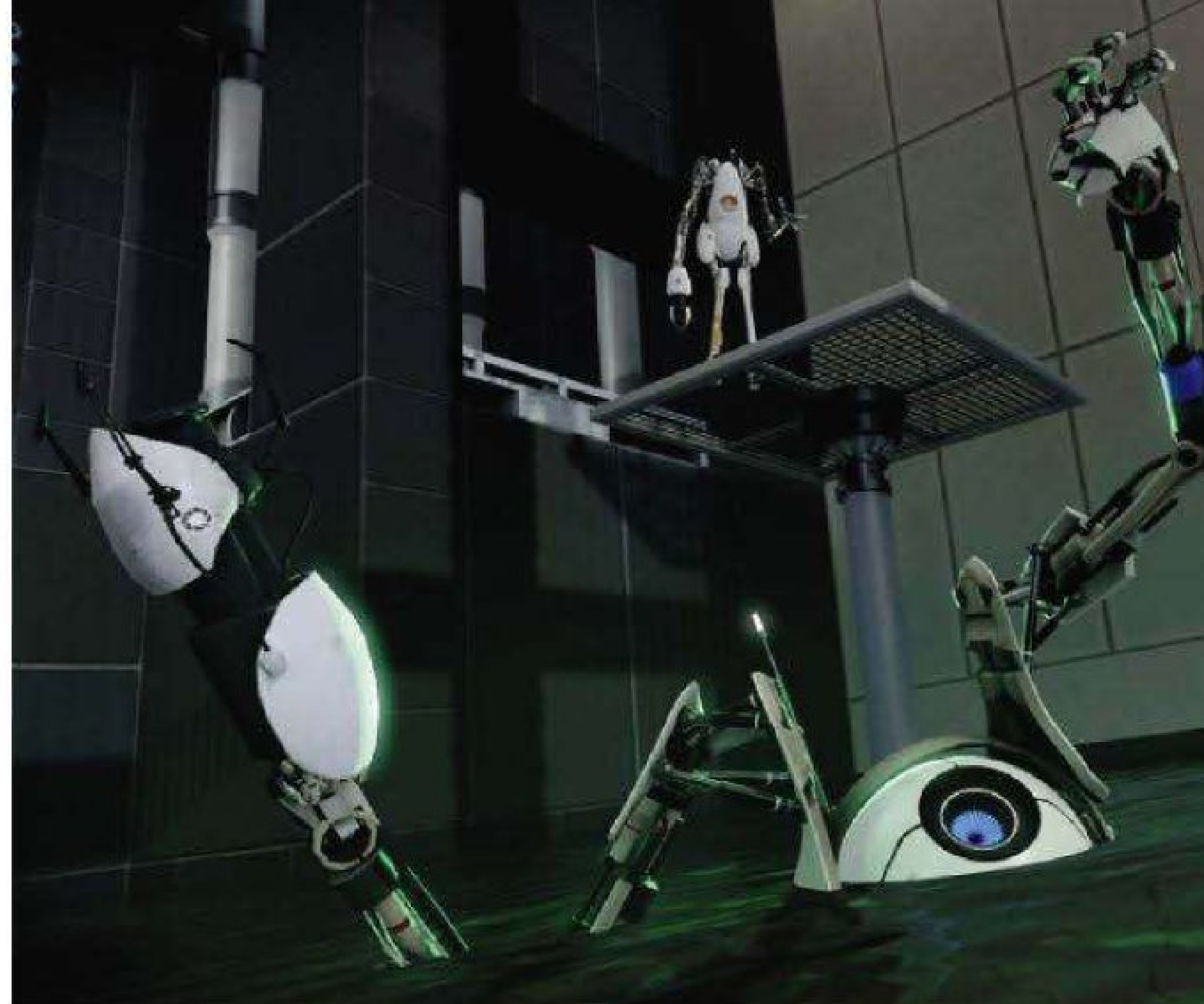


The Aperture turrets make a welcome return, and one section sees Chell poking around their assembly and training lines to see what can be done about getting rid of them permanently. They're far too good to stay down for long, of course

The Orange Box was a quixotic endeavour: unusual and idealistic, it's also probably the greatest value-for-money purchase in gaming history. But while the ongoing adventures of Gordon Freeman and *Team Fortress 2* were the bulk, it was *Portal* that stole hearts. Petite, chic and unique, it's a masterpiece. It was also a whole, self-contained and neatly tied up, before success made a sequel inevitable.

Portal hasn't been reinvented: it's been re-engineered to bear the weight of a much mightier structure. The original's three-hour running time gives way to separate and lengthy singleplayer and co-op campaigns, complete with a celebrity voice cast and a major increase in explosive set-pieces. Everything suggested by the original, *Portal 2* enlarges and accelerates. Its puzzles are yet more adventurous and playful, and its script and world are granted much greater attention and detail.

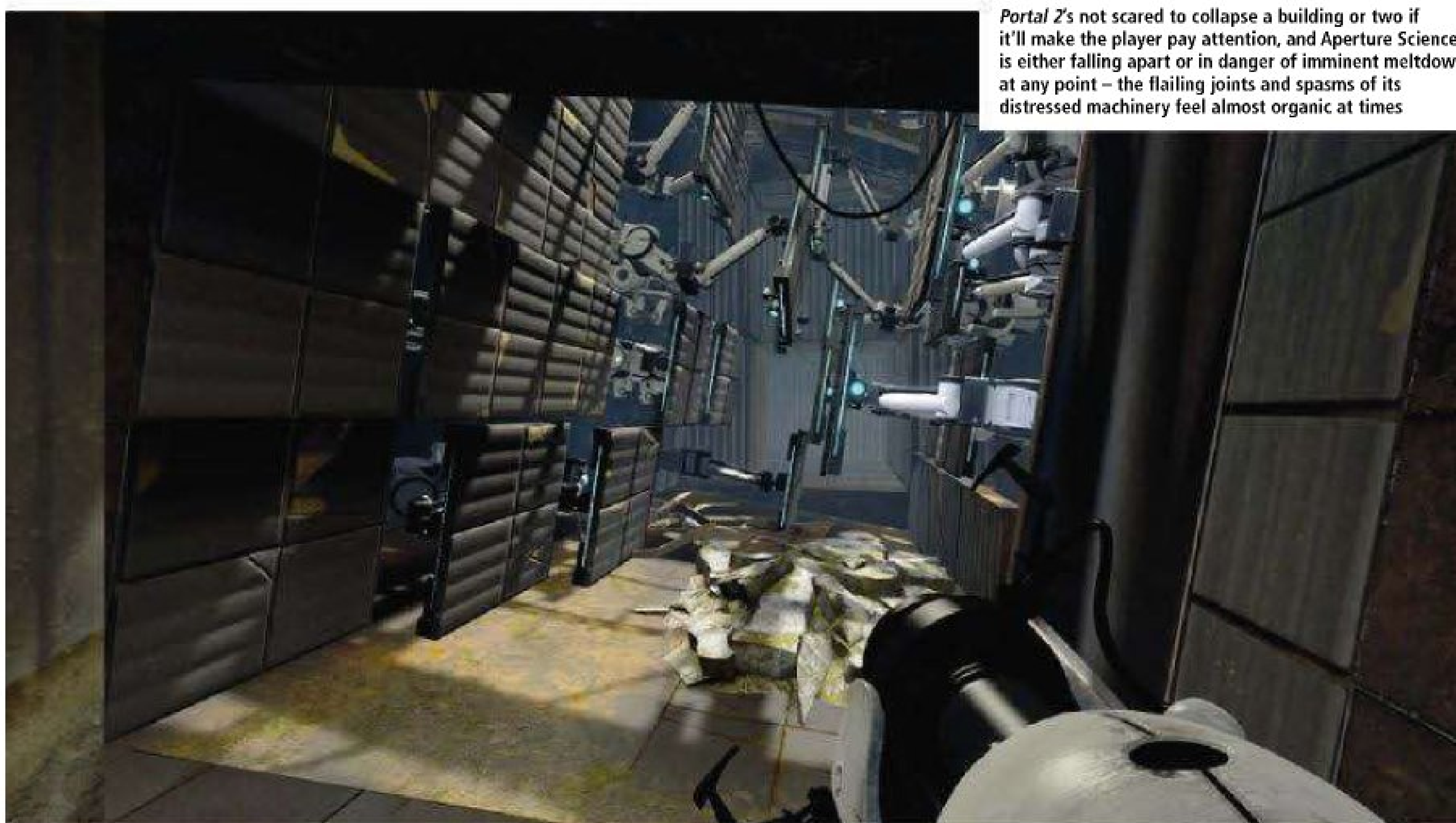
The first hour re-introduces the portal gun efficiently while setting up your companion Wheatley (see 'Personality core') and the return of the sadistic AI matriarch GLaDOS. The fundamentals remain the same – as the mysterious test subject Chell, you are forced to solve deadly puzzles, using a handheld device to paint linked interspatial portals on to surfaces, leaping through them to cross otherwise impassable gaps. The game teases out expectations delightfully with a series of familiar-looking challenges before the first of many jack-in-the-box switches that throw Chell into a whole different game.



Portal 2's difference is scale. Though you're on a straight path through the (now partially destroyed) Aperture Science laboratories, the locations this time around can be gigantic, showcasing abandoned facilities, scooped-out machine shafts and the innards of some mechanical monster. There are great moments not so much of discovery but of forehead-slapping realisation: *Portal 2*'s puzzles have you in a space for an hour, craning to see every nook and cranny, firing portals everywhere while only ever getting halfway to a solution. Then one overlooked variable makes it all click. The game's logic is impeccable, but its joy is all in the motion: as the answer hits and Chell fires from pillar to post like a rubber ball, it's impossible to deny yourself a grin.



> You trigger traps with a human cannonball, shooting away before they can close, feeling like rocket scientist and rocket simultaneously

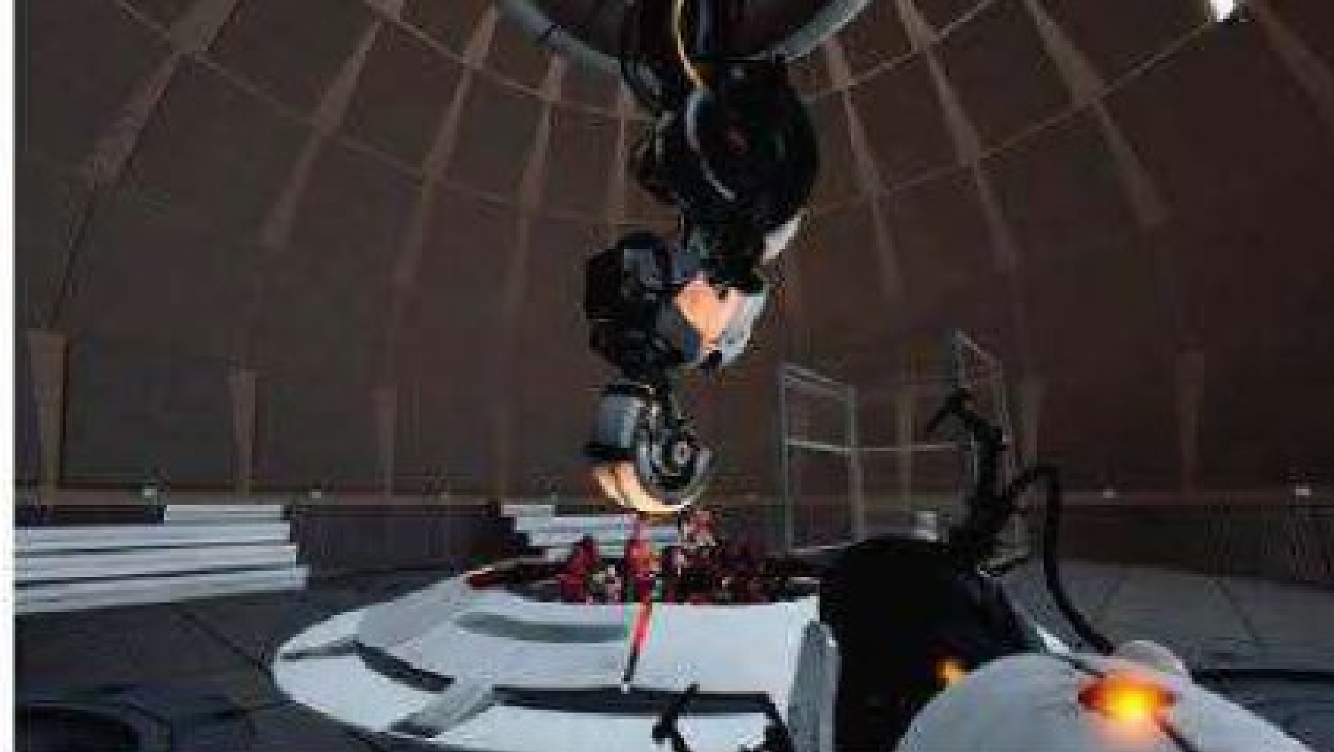


***Portal 2*'s not scared to collapse a building or two if it'll make the player pay attention, and Aperture Science is either falling apart or in danger of imminent meltdown at any point – the flailing joints and spasms of its distressed machinery feel almost organic at times**

The major addition – gel that can be funnelled through portals and splattered on to surfaces – syncs neatly with the standard abilities. There are three gels: orange speeds anything up that moves across it, blue sends players and level furniture bouncing, and white can be slathered on previously portal-resistant surfaces to allow new purchase for your space-warping wormholes. The gels' properties, with their gorgeously gooey physics, exaggerate and accelerate the chaos of the puzzles, adding super-speed highways between portals, setting up dizzying ricochet relays, or simply propelling you into vertiginous positions in anticipation of a bowel-loosening freefall. The potential for setting up huge rat runs is hinted at,



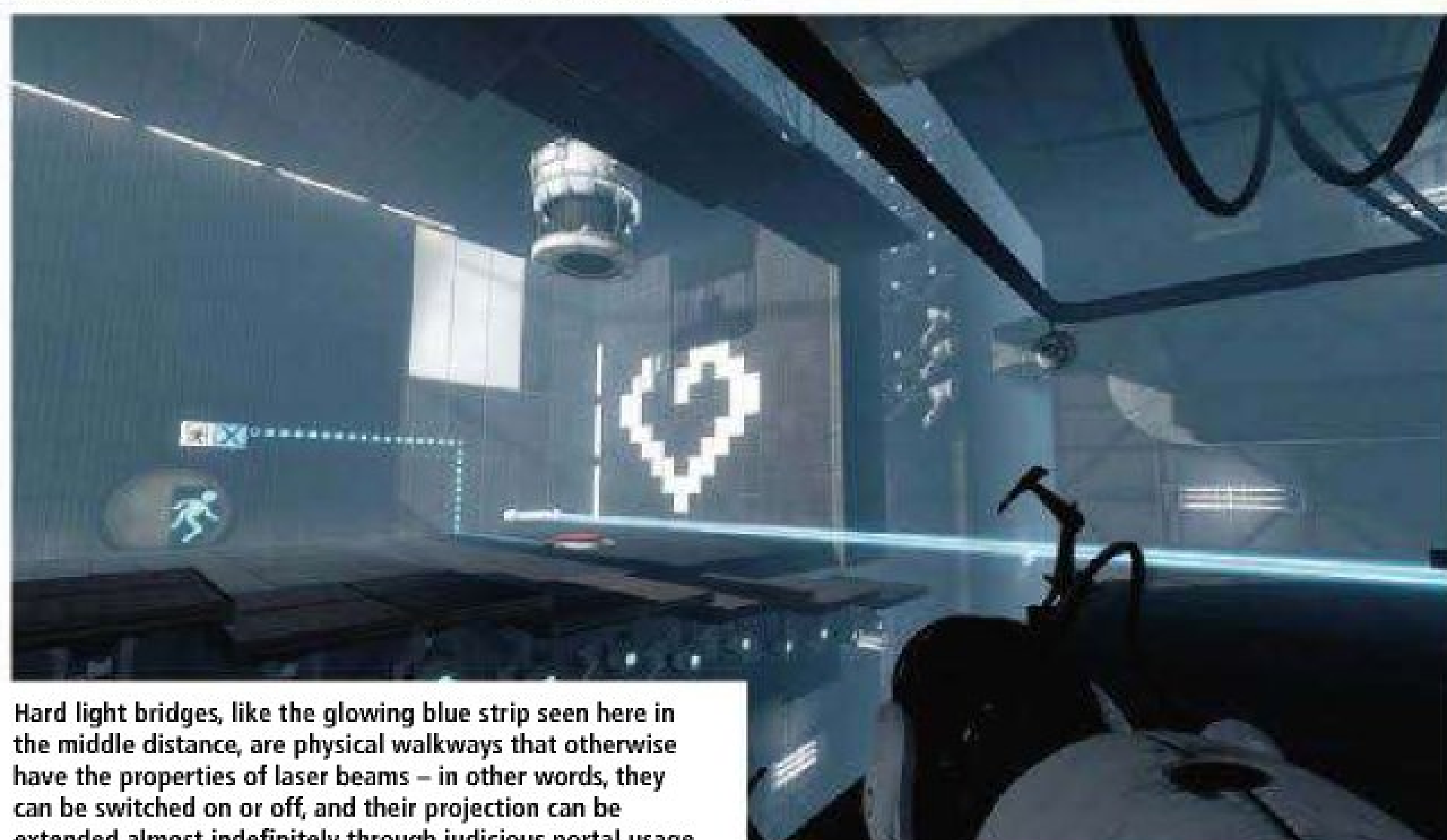
Portal had the lightest touch – a fact easily buried in all the cake-related yammering of fans. Portal 2 makes a concerted effort to avoid a rehash: we caught just one isolated cake reference, and that struck us as being exactly the right serving





One of co-op mode's best features is the apparently dynamic response you get from GLaDOS. After finishing an especially difficult task, we made our robots perform a celebratory jig and were delighted to be rewarded with: "Dancing to celebrate the completion of a simple task. You know who does that? Humans"





Hard light bridges, like the glowing blue strip seen here in the middle distance, are physical walkways that otherwise have the properties of laser beams – in other words, they can be switched on or off, and their projection can be extended almost indefinitely through judicious portal usage

before more expansive challenges really deliver: you trigger traps with a human cannonball, shooting away before they can close, feeling like rocket scientist and rocket simultaneously.

It's a campaign that peaks early, and stays there. Even the ending, so often the glowing weak spot of the firstperson genre, manages to maintain the breathtaking high altitude delivered by the preceding hours. And then there's multiplayer – offering crossplatform play between PC and PS3 – which casts two players as P-Body and Atlas, GLaDOS-engineered testbots that have to run their own six-hour gauntlet of test rooms; the environments are similar, but every challenge is fresh.

Portal's mechanics make the jump smoothly: both players have a gun, though they can't use them to link up each other's portals, and both have to get to the exit to complete a level. There is a range of onscreen pointers and commands that help co-ordinate play, as well as a set of gestures – waving, hugging, dancing – that incur the wrath of the onlooking GLaDOS.

Only a few of the co-op puzzles truly stumped our crack team, but then the point isn't working out what to do: it's doing it in tandem. This is where *Portal 2* shows a genius for physical comedy by constantly putting each player's life in the hands of the other, juggling responsibility between the team and letting someone drop the ball. It always happens: misplacing a portal and shooting your partner into a spiked wall, pressing a button at the wrong time and watching them slowly fall into the abyss, or the classic: turning off the hard light bridge when they're halfway across. When you get it right, there's a sense of a shared achievement; when you get it wrong, it can be laugh-out-loud funny.

In both campaigns *Portal* achieves a rare excellence: it's a remarkably smooth ride that is always just the right side of demanding. There are a few sections in singleplayer, however, where the story stalls the game's otherwise headlong rush rather than facilitating it. Usually a master of the wordless narrative, Valve here has decided to divide action and plot – setting the player only the most undemanding tasks while exposition occurs. Yes, it's true: the most valorised of videogame storytellers may have made the singleplayer so talky that it very occasionally becomes dull.

Who cares? *Portal 2* delivers, and it does it in style, creating one of the most meticulously designed, thrilling and delightful playgrounds we've ever seen. It's a game with a magical take on momentum, where single bounds over tall buildings are business as usual, where every surface is a potential launchpad, and the entire experience is a belly laugh. Valve has a pretty good record with the number two, but attempting to inflate *Portal*'s perfectly formed package could easily have been a disaster. Naturally, the sequel doesn't feel as bracingly fresh as the 2007 game, but it's precisely the sort of dizzying follow-up the original deserves. **[9]**

Personality core



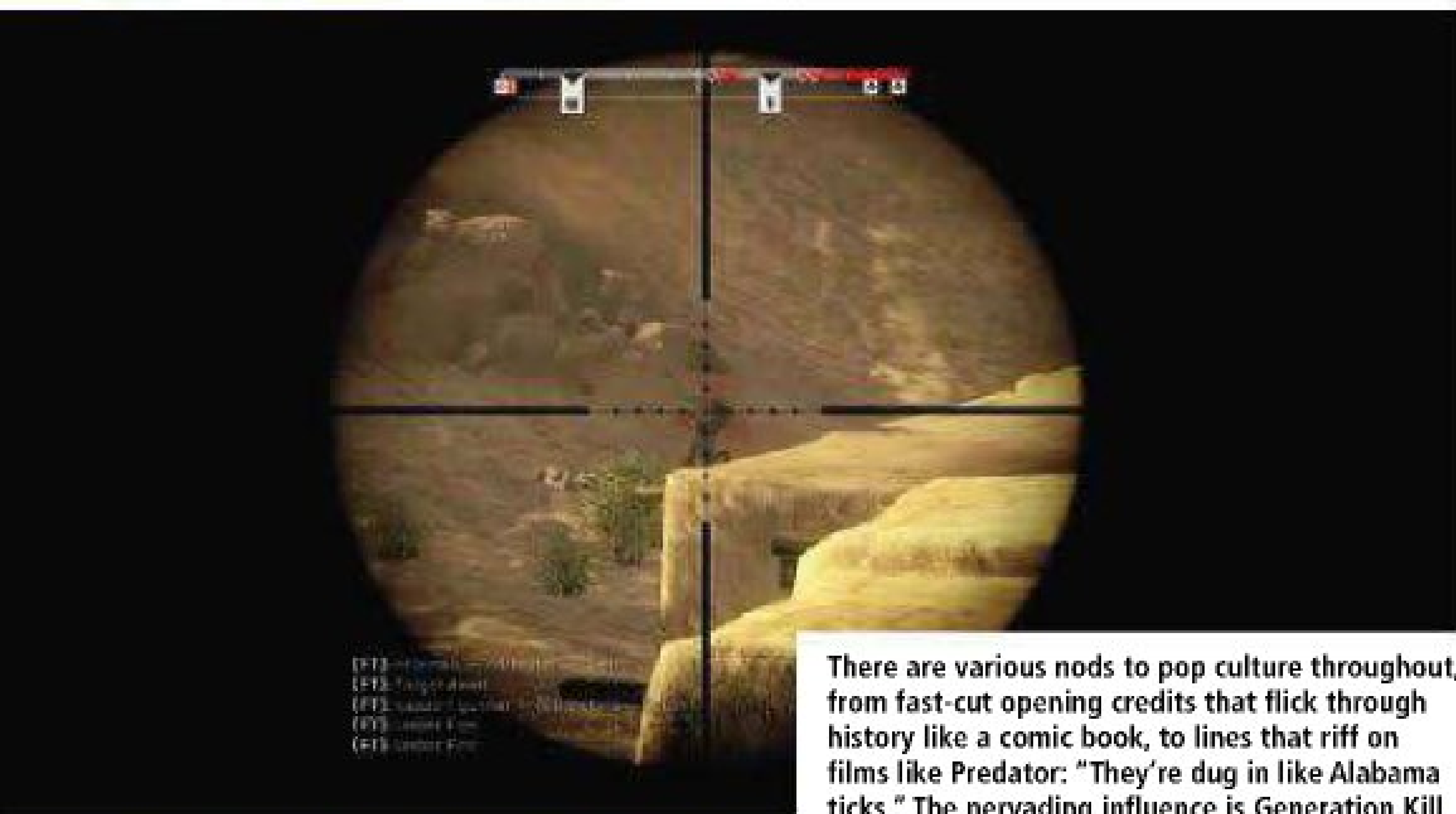
Portal 2's voice talent is outstanding, and the excellent script gives the actors plenty of opportunity to play with their characters. Wheatley is an artificial intelligence encased in a shiny mechanical eye a little bigger than a basketball – and, voiced by Stephen Merchant, he's the main source of comic relief. Alternately hapless and sinister, the mesmerising animations of his 'eye light' and a changing role throughout make him an unforgettable presence. GLaDOS, the returning Ellen McLain, is just as you remember her. The surprise star turn, however, is JK Simmons as Cave Johnson, the gruff and acid alpha male who set up Aperture, who performs with real brio and bite. To quote would be to ruin lines better heard in context. Suffice it to say, they're perfectly pitched, and funny to the bone.

OPERATION FLASHPOINT: RED RIVER

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E223



Red River is an interesting case study in trying to make the poles of entertainment and simulation meet in one FPS package. When it works you're given a real sense of danger as orders are shouted and bombs shake the earth



There are various nods to pop culture throughout, from fast-cut opening credits that flick through history like a comic book, to lines that riff on films like Predator: "They're dug in like Alabama ticks." The pervading influence is Generation Kill

"Rule number one: don't get shot," yells foul-mouthed Sergeant Knox a few moments into *Red River's* opening. It's easier said than done, of course, because this is Codemasters' brand of military FPS, where one shot kills, and brains need to come before brawn. Knox rattles off insults and criticisms for the duration of the ten-hour campaign – he's in your ear during every mission and sat in your transport waiting to berate your slack-jawed, incompetent behind between skirmishes.

In a genre obsessed with elite forces, special ops and supersoldiers, it's refreshing to be put down so regularly and with so much gusto. You're nothing more than a grunt with a peashooter in the scheme of *Red River's* hackneyed politics, and you're reminded of it constantly. Knox is a throwback to '80s and '90s war movie archetypes, where gruff-toned, hard-headed sergeants lead the charge against the "others" roaming the hills. He also mirrors the anachronism of *Red River* itself: an old-fashioned sim in a blockbuster warzone.



> In a genre obsessed with elite forces, special ops and supersoldiers, it's refreshing to be put down so regularly and with so much gusto

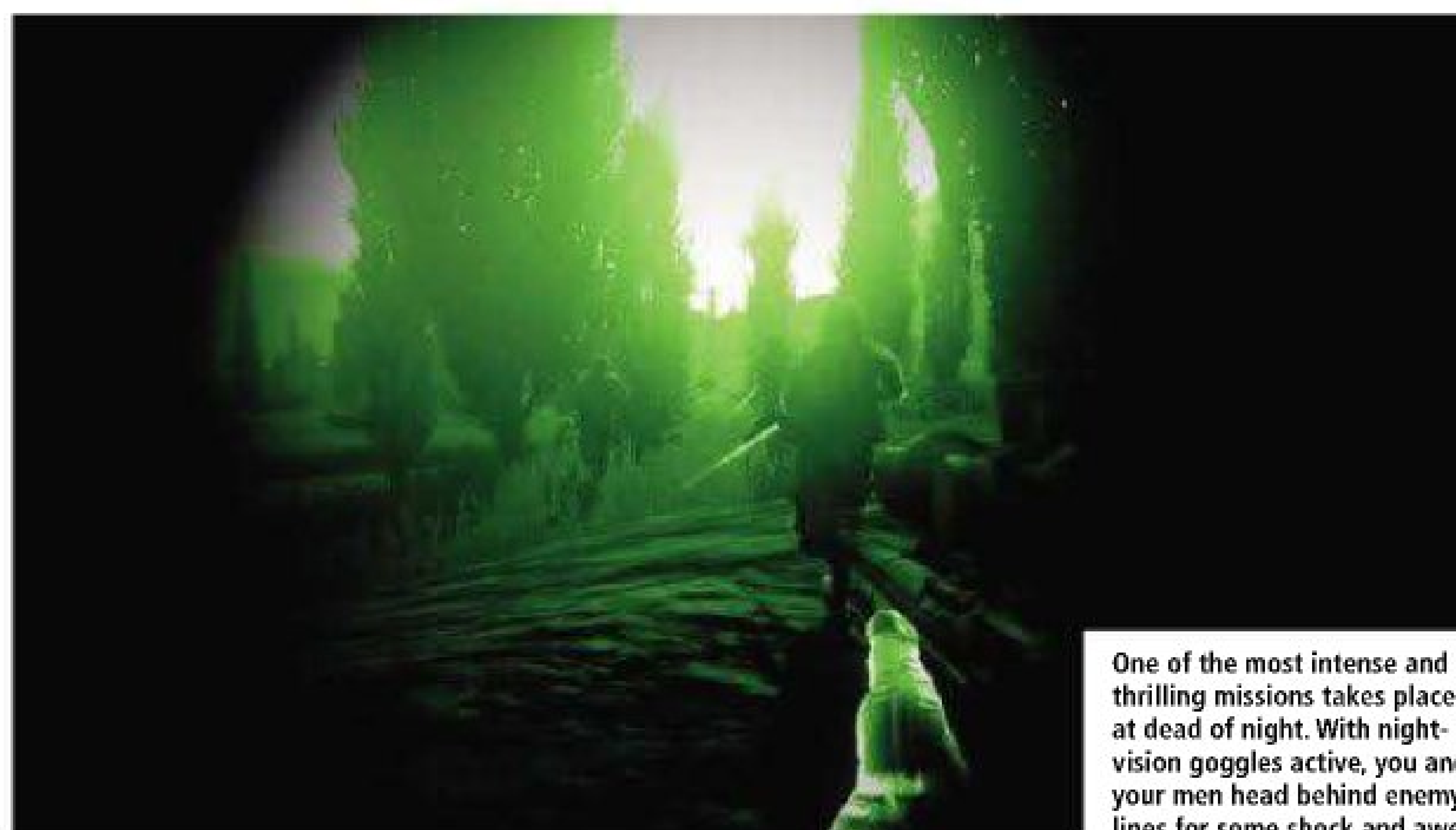


Commanding your men is done with the D-pad. Orders are the usual assortment of hold, suppress or regroup. Most helpful is the ability to call for a medic while on the deck – which happens a lot

Though the ten missions of the campaign take place in the vast, open expanses of near-future Tajikistan, your route through the environments – ticking off constantly changing objectives – is actually very linear. Commanding your three teammates to robotically breach and clear buildings brings to mind early *Rainbow Six*, while the landscape – aside from some gorgeous sunset vistas and lighting – is all jagged rocks and repeating scenery, evoking the spare, unforgiving battlefield of NovaLogic's original *Delta Force*.

It's a shame the bugs and glitches of yesteryear are also part of the nostalgia. Commanding your trio of AI teammates around the battlefield often results in injury (if not death) as they lumber around, nudging you from cover and into enemy sights. Their audio loops and clumsy dialogue cues will drive you to mute speech in the options within minutes, too. The saving grace is that the developer has kept fourplayer co-op part of the *Operation Flashpoint* package (competitive multiplayer has been removed). With three friends

Healing has two stages: the first stops the bleeding, and the second gets you back to 100 per cent. Reaching cover to heal your wounds is a regular and mandatory part of staying alive out there



One of the most intense and thrilling missions takes place at dead of night. With night-vision goggles active, you and your men head behind enemy lines for some shock and awe

alongside you, *Red River* takes on a whole new personality. Healing teammates is no longer the Benny Hill-style chase it is with NPCs, and the chances of an accidental friendly kill are massively reduced.

In a concession to casual players, the easiest difficulty allows for quite a carefree playthrough. Duck-and-cover tactics are still essential, but once you've found the game's rhythm you'll cruise to the finish. Of the four character classes to choose from, it's the scope-loving Scout who's the most useful for entry-level players. The range of sniper rifles pack an authentic punch and bullet-drop needs to be observed if you're going to get your man. When heading indoors – for defending waypoints or hiding out to heal your wounds – you need to change your tactics drastically. Switching to your secondary firearm, whether pistol or sub-machinegun, is the key to survival and brings relief from the constant running and sniping that take up most of your time. The problem is that the game's mechanics, predicated on patience and strategy, aren't suited to close-quarters showdowns. *Red River* tries, and fails, to deliver the mod cons of a current-gen linear shooter within its open environment, leading to a disconnect as you are shepherded from one lacklustre set-piece to another – it's too contrived to permit any great sense of freedom, yet too committed to its awkward dynamism to present a polished script.

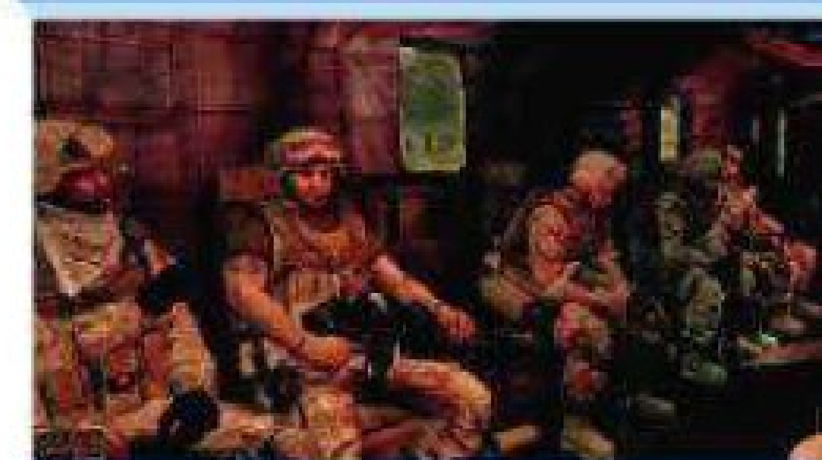
Completed missions earn you points for upgrading your key skills. Everything from weapons handling and accuracy to sprinting stamina can be modified, preparing you for the steep difficulty of the second and third acts of the main game.

Fireteam Engagements are a good place to cut your teeth before braving the harsh realities of the campaign. These standalone co-op missions range from convoy escorts to rescue missions and the set-pieces they offer further highlight *Red River*'s suitability for social play. Take an AI squad into the fray and the likelihood of success is miniscule, but with a few friends and some co-ordination it's all smooth slaying.

Hardcore difficulty is where veteran players will go for their traditional *Flashpoint* kicks. With all HUD information removed (ammo levels fade in and out again upon switching weapons), you'll need a keen ear for Knox's orders to know what it is you're supposed to be doing. Without any indicators you rely on instinct, careful planning and the sound of bullet ricochets to figure out where the threats are, leading – hopefully – to a spray of red mist as you retaliate with shaking hands and straining eyes. The engagements of *Red River* are a nuanced and precise art, one entirely at odds with the hollow cockiness of the cast and one that underscores the real war going on between *Operation Flashpoint*'s essence and its new macho attitude.

In *Red River* the quietude of the series has been sacrificed on the altar of broader entertainment. Knox's mandate may be to rain fiery hell on the enemy, but he's also here to drag this series into the bombastic, faux-masculine world of the big-budget FPS. Ultimately, in trying to make the ends of entertainment and simulation meet, *Red River* takes a bullet for the series' standards and reputation. **[6]**

Audio described



Sergeant Knox's ranting and raving provides entertainment value, but he also delivers sage wisdom for green recruits. His ten rules are worth paying attention to, acting like an in-game survival guide. It begins with the obvious: avoid bullets and use cover – the two core tenets of *Operation Flashpoint*. Later tricks are more subtle, however, such as avoiding enemy weapons that are prone to jamming and performing 'tactical reloads' – changing a magazine with a bullet in the chamber to increase the speed.



Later missions introduce the Humvee as a controllable vehicle. The heavy handling makes it more of a chore than a convenience, but it goes some way to cutting down the long travel times



Between missions, you return to a base in Atlantis, which functions as hub-cum-level-select screen. Waiting there is Andromeda (right), a cranky ally. Atlantis itself is a series of blue-grey corridors



Reloading causes the background to blur – it's an excuse to show off the fact that High Voltage has pulled off depth-of-field effects on Wii. But it quickly becomes more annoying than exciting



CONDUIT 2

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: HIGH VOLTAGE SOFTWARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

ASE does it



Returning from *The Conduit* is protagonist Michael Ford (though this time he's kitted out in a more intimidating and, dare we say it, faintly Spartan-esque suit of armour) as well as his ally Prometheus – an alien consciousness residing in a compact sphere of extraterrestrial technology, the ASE. While you still have to use the ASE to scan parts the environment to unlock doors and progress, you're rarely forced to comprehensively sweep locations as in the first title. The dialogue between Prometheus and Ford is where the game's only real trace of character is found – though we can't help but be reminded of the relationship between another highly advanced super soldier and his companion AI.

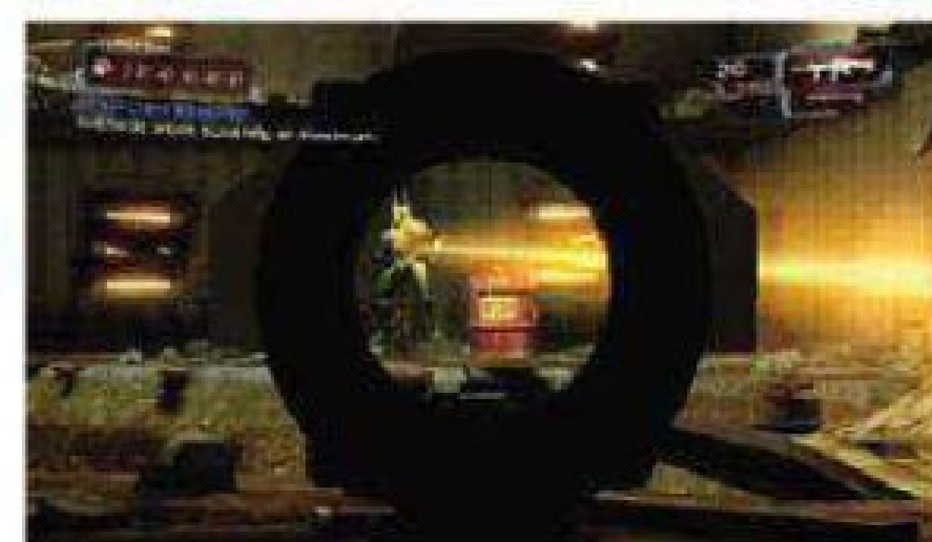
The *Conduit* series is built around a gambit – that there exists an un-sated appetite for a 'hardcore' experience on Wii. But whether there truly is a demand for the hi-fidelity thrills found on other formats among shooter-starved Wii owners is largely academic, because *Conduit 2* – like its predecessor – just isn't up to the task of providing them.

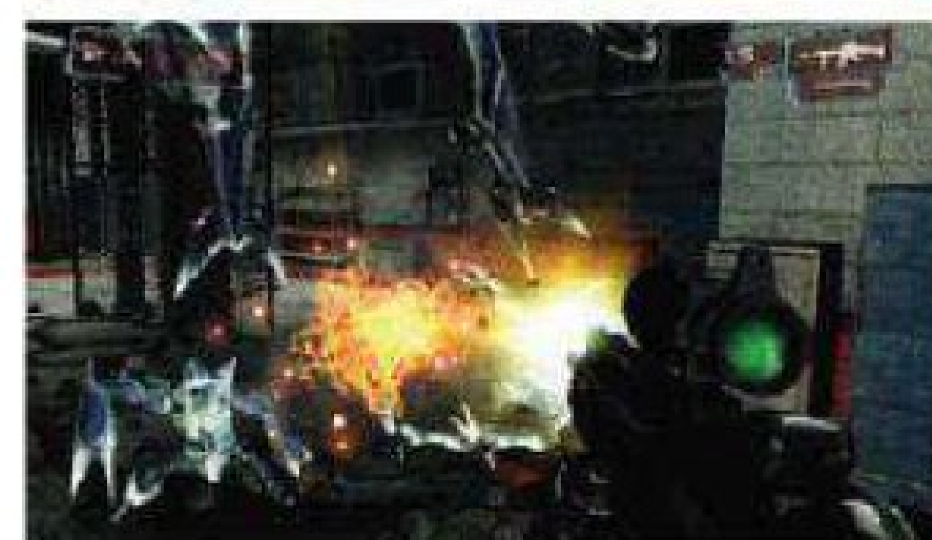
Like *The Conduit*, *Conduit 2* attempts to circumvent control issues through a comprehensive raft of tweaks and sensitivity options rather than hitting upon an intuitive default setting. While most will find Remote settings with which they're happy, those who prefer to play with the Classic Controller will be frustrated – a surprisingly large dead zone makes small adjustments irritatingly awkward – necessitating a choice between the twin sticks' ease of navigation or the pointer's ease of aiming.

High Voltage's Quantum3 engine, meanwhile, remains a perfect demonstration of the gap between technical and aesthetic achievement. We're sure it's successfully squeezing graphical tricks from Nintendo's modest console which other games can't even attempt – but when a game's as plainly styled as this, it's hard to see the point. The opening level – a rain-slashed oil rig under attack from an alien hydra – does manage to conjure up and briefly sustain some atmosphere, but it doesn't last. Subsequent levels move between drab urban settings (including an Oxford quad which looks like a large beige box with a patch of green in the centre) and sci-fi staples. While levels aren't unremittingly corridor based, they often feel partitioned and boxy, with doors, airlocks and other barriers giving adjacent areas an excuse to load.

All this might just be forgivable, of course, if it weren't for *Conduit 2*'s most critical flaw: this is a firstperson shooter in which combat is a chore. Your enemies – a mixture of human mercenaries and the unfortunately named aliens, the Drudge – simply don't have the wits about them to offer an interesting fight. The weapon-set, meanwhile, might as well be conspiring with your foes for all the enthusiasm it gives you to shoot them. While human weapons work as you'd expect, the more exotic alien guns merely seem to shoot vague blobs of yellow at enemies (though one – a reimagining of *Perfect Dark*'s X-ray-powered Farsight – is fun to play with). Guns and bad guys are the core of any FPS, and in *Conduit 2* there's little pleasure in mixing the two.

Multiplayer fares slightly better. *The Conduit* offered a satisfactory (though bog-standard) selection of deathmatch and objective-based modes, and the experience is much the same here, with the added bonus that splitscreen play is now an option. The new Invasion mode, meanwhile, offers Wii owners who've never played Firefight or Horde a wave-based survival gametype of their own, with the twist that enemies drop collectible coins when killed that contribute towards each player's individual score.





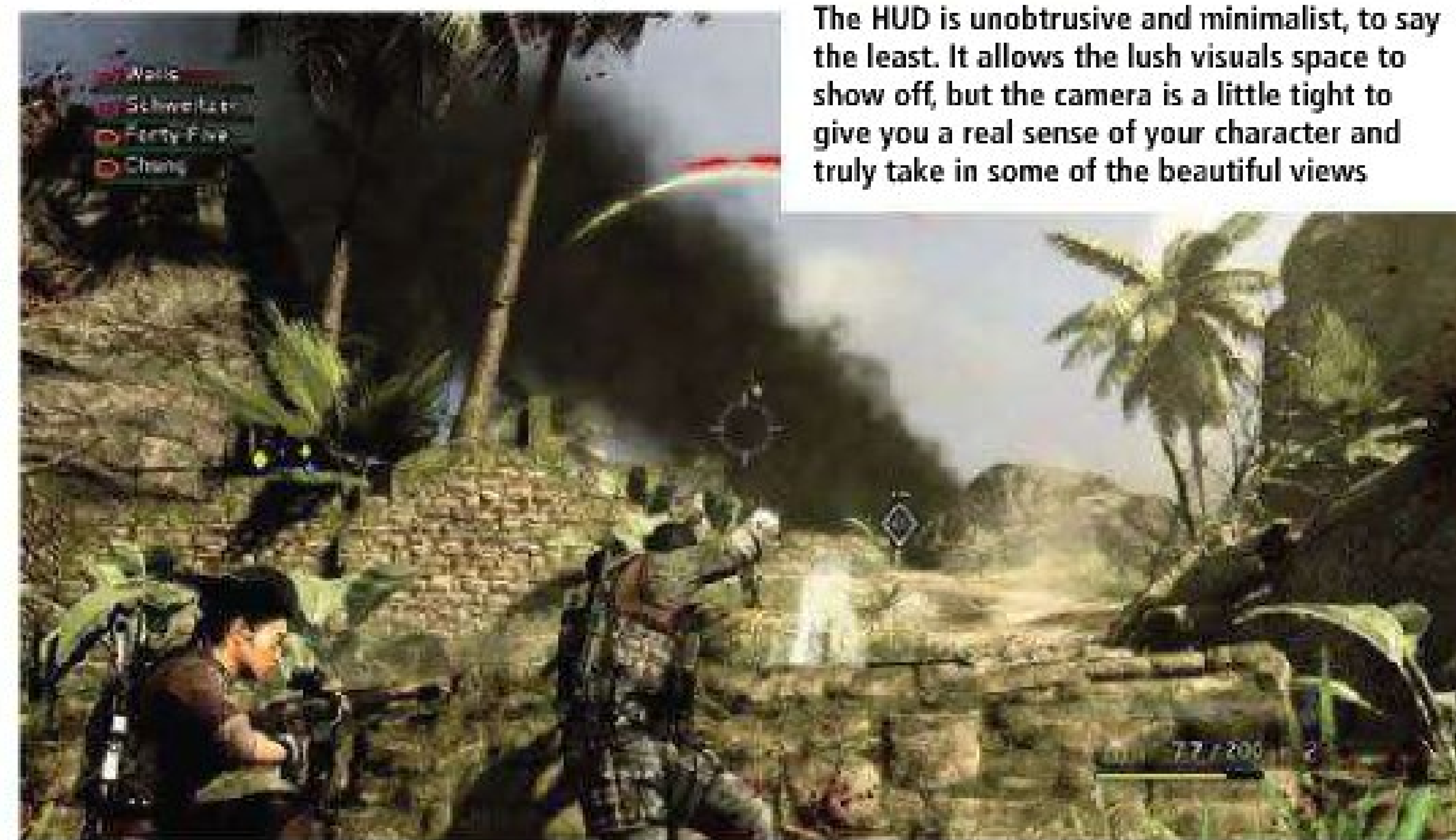
Weirdly, the singleplayer contains purposeless levels clearly designed for multiplayer and which contain no real objectives. We wandered around one for ten minutes before realising we could leave the way we came in

Merely competent takes on familiar modes can't salvage what, the rest of the time, is a sub-par game. *Conduit 2* may be a follow-up, but it shows a refusal to learn from the first game's shortcomings that – in its stubborn tenacity – is almost hardcore. **[4]**





The HUD is unobtrusive and minimalist, to say the least. It allows the lush visuals space to show off, but the camera is a little tight to give you a real sense of your character and truly take in some of the beautiful views



Later in the campaign, snipers rear their ugly, camping heads. They do a good job of slowing you down and forcing you to co-ordinate an attack with your team



SOCOM: SPECIAL FORCES

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE DEVELOPER: ZIPPER INTERACTIVE

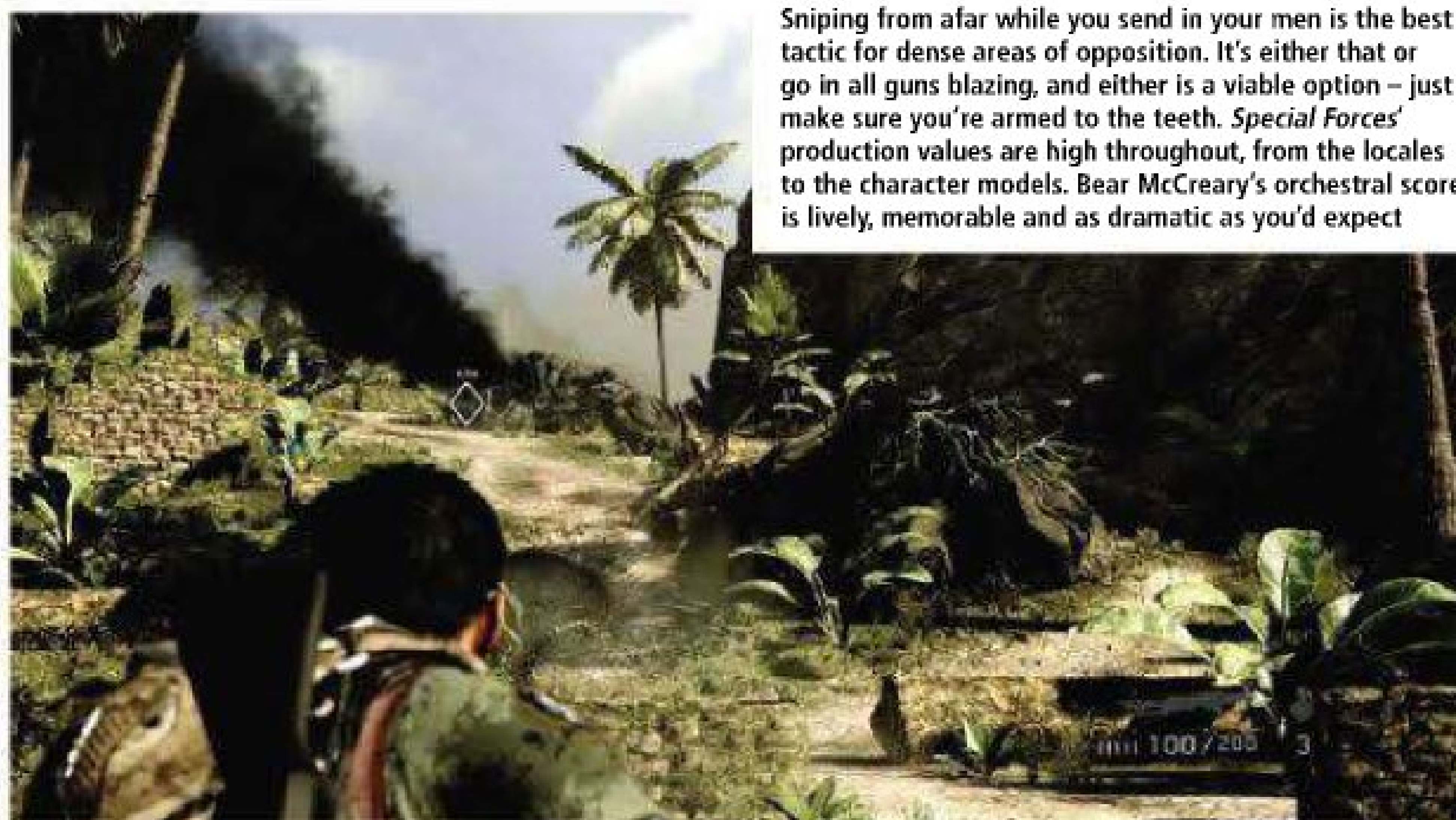
The *SOCOM* series has fluctuated between simulation and thirdperson shooter tendencies – often within the runtime of one title – but with *Special Forces*, Zipper Interactive, the company behind the first *SOCOM*, has delivered its first pure action game. Perhaps all that time developing *MAG* has made the studio yearn for something more linear and manageable.

Uncharted, surprisingly, is the main influence on *Special Forces*. From the set-pieces to the dense jungles and ancient ruins, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd wandered into the wrong franchise. The mechanics, too, are straight out of Naughty Dog's cover-shooter playbook. You'll spend most of the campaign sticking to walls, popping out to mow down a group of rebel soldiers before pushing on to the next gang of unsuspecting foes. Levels are more like film sets than warzones, abandoning any semblance of the realism present in previous series entries. Explosive barrels are placed conveniently near enemy positions and turrets, open weapon crates are dotted all over the maps, and you can barely take 100 paces before something explodes.

The brevity of the game belies the new thrill-a-minute ethos. Missions rarely last more than 15 minutes, and the entire campaign is five hours at a stretch. A few stealth missions are interspersed to break things up – again tinted with some *Uncharted* inspiration in their looks and reliance on stealth kills – but they aren't deep enough to require any skill beyond staying low and walking between checkpoints.



Sniping from afar while you send in your men is the best tactic for dense areas of opposition. It's either that or go in all guns blazing, and either is a viable option – just make sure you're armed to the teeth. *Special Forces*' production values are high throughout, from the locales to the character models. Bear McCreary's orchestral score is lively, memorable and as dramatic as you'd expect



Retained from previous *SOCOM* iterations are your AI teammates. Your squad is split into two pairs, a sniper team and a macho pair of gunners, each at your command via the D-pad. Your allies do a lot of the hard work for you, and are capable of taking on all-comers without you having to boss them around. *Special Forces* is user-friendly to the extent that it neuters its own challenge by holding your hand and watching your back almost every step of the way.

Now erring on the side of action-adventure, *Special Forces* lacks the characterisation and sense of place so crucial to the greats of the genre. The men and women of *SOCOM* are the rigid, lifeless war machines they've always been, with the script giving little time for intrigue and little incentive for player investment. The scenery is recycled too frequently to leave a lasting impression, and though the screen is bursting with activity it never trumps the urban assault that opens the game.

Multiplayer brings to mind Slant Six's *SOCOM Confrontation*, requiring higher levels of caution and co-ordination to prevail than the singleplayer shootouts. It's a more muted affair, forcing you to scout before you shoot and a welcome break from the relentless campaign. With capacity for 32 players it can occasionally get crowded, however, and Supression matches (*SOCOM*'s take on team deathmatch) can become overwhelming as the bullets start flying.

SOCOM's new, all-action direction could ultimately work in the brand's favour if subsequent entries can capitalise on this game's (admittedly uneven) foundations. After some hit-and-miss experimentation, *SOCOM* needed refreshing, and this more aggressive approach is aiming in the right direction, even if it isn't a direct hit. **[6]**

Move! Move! Move!



Move functionality has been implemented in *Special Forces* and proves that a traditional thirdperson shooter can get along perfectly well with motion control. You'll need to customise the aiming sensitivity of the Move controller to cater to quick reflexes (the camera is moved when your crosshair reaches the borders of the screen) but the linear levels ease you in with their shooting gallery setups. The official Sharp Shooter add-on (above), fashioned after a sub-machine gun, however, is far less inviting. Twisting your torso to aim and move the camera at the same time is far more awkward than a flick of the wrist. The Navigation Controller's position at the far end of the device means you have no chance to rest either of your arms, which can be painful during lengthy showdowns. War is hell, but who said it had to be uncomfortable?





The repair tool lets you restore allies, equipment and even yourself (left). *Prejudice*'s range of customisable tools and perks is extensive, though if you want a melee attack you must give up one equipment slot for a knife



The extra-fast 'overdrive' dash (below) lets you move a considerable distance on a full charge. Combined with the jetpack, there are few structures unscaleable in a single bound



SECTION 8: PREJUDICE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: TIMEGATE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

Dynamic comeback



A team which has accumulated enough points during a battle can launch a 'dynamic combat mission' – a one-off objective separate from the base-capturing focus of the game. These may involve protecting a convoy as it lumbers towards its target or, if you're on the opposing team, ensuring that it doesn't make it there at all. They're the perfect incentive to lure a winning team away from their defended positions. Win the DCM and you'll further cement your battlefield superiority; lose and your opponents may just get the points and morale boost they need to make a resurgence.

Barely a minute into the singleplayer campaign of *Section 8: Prejudice*, and a gruff commanding officer is inviting you to take aim at targets in a shooting gallery, with a pop-up asking if you'd like to invert the right stick. It's a competent but achingly familiar start to a modern FPS. What a relief, then, that moments later you're being taught the correct way to drop into a battlefield from low orbit, or how to go about hacking control points and repairing defensive turrets. The first *Section 8* brought an RTS mentality to its online skirmishes – its orbital drop respawn mechanic invited players to consider the balance of power across the entire battlefield, while its moderate array of deployable tools meant locking down control points had as much to do with astute placing of defences as it did your own abilities.

It's strange, then, that despite the series introducing them, *Prejudice*'s story mode ignores these distinguishing factors. In response to criticism of the previous game's singleplayer component – which took place on the multiplayer maps and served as an introduction to its online mode – Timegate has ambitiously attempted to serve up a full campaign alongside expanded multiplayer options in its download-only sequel. It's an awkward misstep – *Prejudice*'s campaign suffers from a low-budget feeling throughout, made worse by its attempts to force mechanics built around fortifying positions and assaulting them on to a linear shooter template.

The orbital drops which herald every respawn in multiplayer are absent here, appearing only in non-interactive form at the start of a level. And whereas multiplayer matches will see you setting up deployable turrets, anti-air defences and enemy-spotting radar dishes, singleplayer only lets you place rigidly prescribed equipment at rigidly prescribed times. It's telling that these moments still manage to provide some of the campaign's more interesting battles, matched only by some later segments which see you assaulting equally well-fortified bases. But with little in the way of set-pieces or spectacle to differentiate one section of a level from the next, fatigue will set in despite the campaign's modest length.

Swarm mode – *Prejudice*'s wave-based, defensive gametype – offers better combat against AI-controlled foes. While working similarly to Firefight et al, *Section 8*'s equipment-purchasing mechanic sets up a kind of escalating carnage. Your first kills earn the cash needed to purchase a deployable turret – which then earns more kills allowing you to call in a second, missile-firing gun. By the end of a match your base will be a heavily defended fortress, patrolled by you and your comrades stomping across its walkways in oversized mechs.

Conquest – a control-point, team-based game – allows up to 32 players to battle for control of four such bases over considerably larger maps. As with the previous game, these battles are intimidatingly free-flowing – deployable equipment means a safe avenue of assault in one game might be a hornets' nest the next – with the series' dynamic combat missions (see 'Dynamic comeback') further destabilising the balance of power at any point. This mode contains the best that *Prejudice* has to offer, encouraging a teamwork absent from most firstperson shooters. It's also the mode in which *Section 8*'s super-sprint ability and your jetpack make the most sense – such are the distances you have to traverse in short times. Players looking for a more tightly structured experience will likely be left cold, however.



Re-entering levels from on high is a thrill (above), but despite the vistas, *Prejudice*'s singleplayer funnels you along, flashing warnings should you dare to wander

Prejudice's failing is mainly one of ambition – as a follow-up to *Section 8*, it delivers much the same experience as its predecessor, albeit repackaged in a more wallet-friendly, downloadable form. But where the opportunity might have been taken to expand on the intriguing multiplayer framework provided by the first game, *Prejudice* feels like a retread, albeit one lumbered with half-hearted singleplayer that undersells its most intriguing features. **[6]**



Mortal Kombat offers a variety of multiplayer options, with online eightplayer lobbies sporting the spectator mode that was so lamentably absent from *Marvel Vs Capcom 3*



New to the series is Tag Team mode, with characters switchable mid-combo, or called in for *MVC*-style assists. Two players can play through arcade mode in Team Ladder, or head online



Story mode changes your fighter every few matches. While serving as a good introduction to the cast, it puts you back to square one just as you're getting to grips with an unfamiliar moveset



MORTAL KOMBAT

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: NETHERREALM STUDIOS

With the fighting genre reborn following Capcom's sensitive updates to its *Street Fighter* and *Marvel Vs Capcom* series – refining and rebalancing their ageing combat systems to appeal to old hands and new challengers alike – this ninth *Mortal Kombat* presents NetherRealm Studios with the chance to give the series a thorough overhaul. Instead, it has opted for loyalty to mechanics that, even when the original hit arcades, felt dated.

The 1992 original's use of digitised sprites lent an understandable clunkiness to the action, a sense that models in fixed positions were being dragged across the screen, and that remains. Normal and jumping attacks lack weight, and there's the same awkwardness in putting together your own combos: the moves that flow into one another are dictated by the game, rather than discovered through player experimentation. Furthermore, players often find themselves trapped in corners – having backed away only to find an invisible wall is nearer than you think. Rounds begin where previous ones ended; lose one backed into a corner, and that's where you start the next.

There are nods to modernity, of course, chiefly with the X-Ray meter. Taking inspiration from *Street Fighter IV*'s Ultra moves, the gauge builds as you take hits, and when full allows you to unleash the most powerful move in your arsenal, a slow-motion string of fracture-porn attacks that strip a third of your opponent's life. Partially filling the gauge allows enhanced special moves and combo breakers, but X-Ray itself is such a powerful option that you'll rarely opt for the alternatives.

NetherRealm has focused much of its attention on the series' unique selling point. Blood is everywhere: gushing out of freshly opened wounds, clotting on faces and bodies as a match progresses, and, of course, in the series' trademark finishing moves. Each character has multiple fatalities, performed after a match is won: limbs are rent asunder, corpses cleaved in two, hearts are ripped out, and heads are pulled off and shoved in the hole where the heart was. These gratuitous footnotes are only new once, and as bound to the law of diminishing returns as ever. With only one fatality per character at the outset – with more unlockable or hidden (see 'Everything starts with a K') – repetition sets in quickly.

While recent genre reboots have undersold the singleplayer, *Mortal Kombat* touts an eight-hour story mode. The difficulty ramps up, players take on the same bosses several times and, later on, are tasked with defeating three foes in succession with a single energy bar. Its principal antagonist and final boss is an enormously unfair creation at which even the famously hard-hearted boss designers at SNK would baulk. With invincibility on almost all of his moves, double the health of any playable character and an X-Ray combo that does over 50 per cent damage, beating him is an exercise in cheap, repetitive tactics, of working around the combat system rather than within it. It's a needless throwback to when games were designed to guzzle coins from arcade players.

At its heart – or the hole where its torn-out heart used to be – this is still *Mortal Kombat*, with all that implies: a game held back from the reinvention it requires by too rigid an adherence to its original mechanics. While fans will revel in the HD sheen of its signature gore, long-standing cynics and newcomers alike will find a game that, just as it did 19 years ago, pales in comparison to its more fluid, graceful peers. **[6]**



The 300-stage Challenge Tower promises a further ten hours of singleplayer content. Mixing up the pace are a variety of minigames, but few pose much of a challenge

Everything starts with a K



Progression through the game's singleplayer modes awards players with Koins, which can be spent unlocking items in the Krypt, a firstperson trawl through the underworld's torture facilities and graveyard with each iron maiden, rack and mausoleum containing bonus content. Additional fatalities are unlocked here, along with alternate costumes, gameplay modifiers, concept art and music, but with no indication of what they're actually buying until after the transaction, players may be stuck with one fatality for their favourite character for some time, albeit with a vast collection of renders, sounds and sketches. Unlocked items, along with character stats, bios and endings, can be viewed in the Nekropolis.



With 3D cranked up, it feels like you're looking into an unusually stocked aquarium. Sunken ships and tiny volcanoes enhance the all-round 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea feel







One submarine can launch its torpedoes vertically, but the other two can make it past surface ships if you move at full speed and don't attack them head on





Scoreboard addicts should turn to the thirdperson Periscope Strike mode and the time trial challenges, where you snake your submarine through tight quarters and tighter corners as quickly as possible

STEEL DIVER

FORMAT: 3DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NINTENDO/VITTEL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

Forget Mario, Link and Samus. Nintendo's early 3DS titles are all about means of transportation. *Pilotwings Resort* has the recognition factor, but unusual submarine sim *Steel Diver* is the game you'll remember, and not necessarily for the best reasons. It's essentially the slowest side-scrolling shoot 'em up you'll ever play, demanding you laboriously guide a submarine to the end of each level while avoiding damage and destroying evil submarines whose perfidy knows no bounds and warrants no backstory.

The side-scrolling missions make up the bulk of *Steel Diver*, with controls that are based entirely around the touchscreen. You adjust depth and forward or backward motion by sliding onscreen levers with the stylus: there are multiple speed gradients on each slider and the submarine tends to briefly drift even when you reset both levers to the neutral position. You'll spend most of your time going back and forth between these two levers, struggling to calibrate the perfect position for your sub. It's deliberately complicated, and makes the submarine feel less responsive than you'd like, but it also provides a sense of how difficult it must be to navigate a massive chunk of metal through turbulent water.

You slide your submarine through undersea grottoes and around mines in an awkward balancing act, never quite coming to a full stop, and often bumping into craggy outcroppings or the ocean floor. Your ship occasionally springs leaks plugged by rapidly tapping specific spots on the touchscreen and, in later missions, enemies launch torpedoes and depth charges at you, all of which can be destroyed with the torpedoes you fire by pressing an icon. Take enough hits and it's straight back to the mission select screen, however.

There are three submarines to pick from, with speed and manoeuvrability comprising the most significant distinctions (see 'Sub menu'). Your choice will rarely have a noticeable impact on strategy during the missions (though bring a sub incapable of firing torpedoes vertically to fight against a surface-dwelling battleship and you'll struggle) as you'll mostly be fumbling with the controls in an attempt to beat the frustrating ten-minute time limit. The submarines' variable manoeuvrability does play a crucial role in time trials, however, eight small courses which offer challenging bursts of high-performance sub captaining.

Despite being a good-looking game, *Steel Diver* doesn't do much with the system's 3D capabilities. The extra layer of depth makes each level look like an underwater diorama – as if submarine battles have taken over your aquarium screensaver.

The missions are complemented by a simple shooting gallery in which you use the motion controls to steer your periscope, and a bare-bones strategy game spiritually similar to Battleship. The strategy minigame can be played with others via downloadable play, which is the full extent of the game's multiplayer. Neither adds much value to *Steel Diver*, however, which takes a childhood dream and smothers it with work. **[5]**



The horizontal and vertical sliders make it tricky to move or aim precisely. Position yourself early to take out blockages, or risk wasting time by stopping or reversing

Sub menu



The three submarine types follow tried-and-true videogame convention. The small and swift Manatee is the easiest to manoeuvre but is light on armour and firepower. The mid-size BlueShark is middle-of-the-road, competent at everything but extraordinary at nothing. The hulking Serpent is the underwater equivalent of a tank, slow but sturdy and with extreme firepower. All three are capable of briefly masking their presence and slipping by enemies undetected. The quicker speeds of the Manatee and BlueShark help with the time trials, but there's not much practical difference between the three on the campaign maps.





The hero editor screen (above) is straight from *Spore*, down to reusing many of the creature pieces and giving them RPG stats and silly names. The one clever touch in the story is the way that your ship's computer points out the local landmarks on the planets you visit



Playing online means many heroes (or 'living weapons'), pets and effects littering the screen. Keeping track of targets can be difficult, though your attacks are powerful enough to compensate, while varied enemies keep you on your toes



DARKSPORE

FORMAT: MAC, PC (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

For better and worse, *Darkspore* has next to nothing to do with the original *Spore*. Beyond sharing a little technology, they're practically mirror opposites. *Spore* was a pile of great ideas in search of a basic game. *Darkspore* is a basic game in search of great ideas. Specifically, it's *Diablo*, in space, with a co-op focus. You can play its campaign on your own, but you still have to log in, and your characters and progress stay on EA's servers.

Darkspore's lack of ambition makes it a difficult game to get excited about, even with the solid hack'n'slash action at its core. Combat has weight and heft, whether you're blinking around the map as a fast-assault type, scuttling around as a death spider that harvests souls for extra power, or carving up hordes with a big sword. With the ability to switch in and out three heroes per player, every play style is covered.

Enemies benefit from being equally flexible, pulling every trick from temporary invincibility at half strength to firing incredibly slow projectiles that force you to keep ducking and weaving around the battle. These types of abilities are the rule rather than the exception, and are further improved by *Darkspore* constantly fielding mixed packs of aliens. The fighting is usually too chaotic for real tactics to emerge from this, but fast-paced enough that it doesn't matter – especially with a full team of humans playing.

Where *Darkspore* fails is in trying to make you care about the action. Its sci-fi story is po-faced and lifeless. The level objectives never evolve beyond trudging down linear paths, killing everything that moves and picking up generic loot. After most stages, you face an alien horde. After every fourth, there's a boss. Regular scenery changes can't disguise the crushing grind, especially when you fall behind the power curve and have to start replaying levels to scrounge better gear. Even with instant matchmaking to ensure you never have to play alone, the smooth combat gets buried by the repetition.

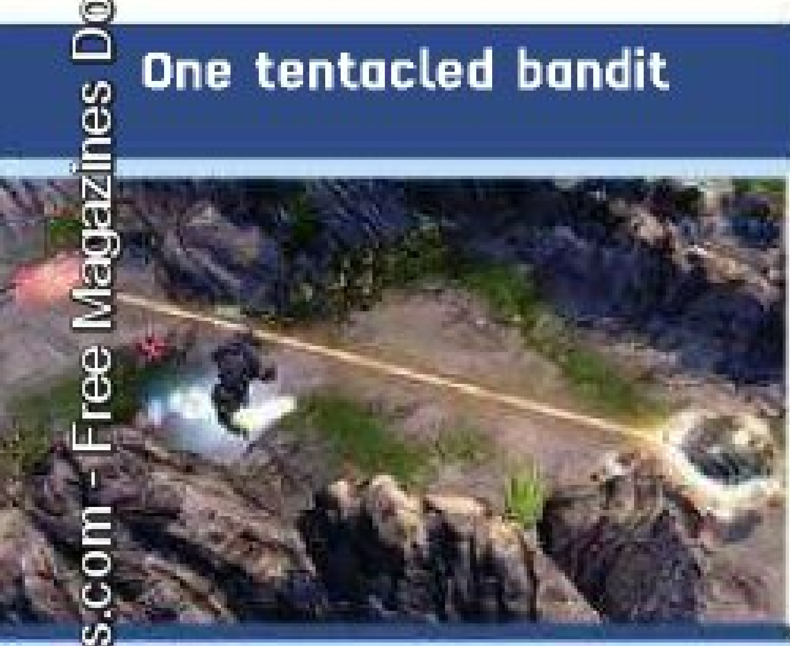
Character customisation is the other big disappointment. There's no shortage of heroes to recruit, assemble into squads, gear up and try out. All of this works fine, with lots of variety. However, the absence of one key feature – the ability to create your own heroes from scratch – is painful. Despite using *Spore*'s Creature Creator as a base, all the *Darkspore* editor lets you do is pick a pre-made character, swap out a few body parts, repaint them and add some extra details. Whatever the justification for this, from game balance to simplifying unit identification, to EA just not wanting *Darkspore* to turn into *War Of The Penis Monsters II*, it was the wrong call to make.

While its limited scope as a simple hack'n'slash game would always have made *Darkspore* a short-term thrill, at least its predecessor's freedom could have offered plenty of online surprises, and a real connection to your heroes. Without these additional elements, *Darkspore* remains a humdrum deep-space *Diablo*, but one doomed to be defined more by what it's missing than what it offers. **[4]**



Characters are split into element types, and fighting like with like means your hero taking double damage. This seems unfair. Shouldn't the enemies suffer too?

One tentacled bandit



***Darkspore*'s best ideas are in the margins, like its between-levels gambling system. Every time you finish one, you get to roll for a good piece of kit (your chances being based on how well you performed). Alternatively, you can gamble your prize on completing the next level and, with the right abilities, several levels after that as well. Working with friends to keep the chain going as long as possible makes for a good self-imposed challenge. There's a little extra tension to it, but the price of failure isn't so high that you feel too bad about losing.**

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MONSTER TALE

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (EU)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: DREAMRIFT

The first title to be released by DreamRift, a studio composed of many who worked on EA Casual's puzzle and platform game *Henry Hatsworth And The Puzzling Adventure*, *Monster Tale* displays a similar willingness to mix genres across DS screens. On the top screen is an action-based 2D platformer in the vein of *Metroid* – blue-haired protagonist Ellie jumps and fights her away across a world subdivided into a series of smaller maps, collecting skills and abilities which slowly open up further avenues for exploration. On the lower screen sits Chomp, a virtual pet who, with a tap of a button, will float to the top screen in order to aid Ellie in battle or help her solve some rudimentary switch-based puzzles.

Enemies defeated on the top screen will often drop items – ranging from giant cherries to toy cars to dumbbells – that, when collected, fall to the screen below. As Chomp plays with and eats these treats he grows and develops new abilities, sometimes changing form entirely. The game derives much of its appeal from watching Chomp grow in ways you can influence, but not fully predict. Stuff Chomp with ice cream while stimulating his intellect with books and he might grow into the ranged-attack-favouring Spitter form, whereas an all-veg diet will produce the fast, strong Glider. Between forms, Chomp will learn new abilities (activated by the shoulder buttons) and passive, stat-altering traits. Add to this a rock-paper-scissors dynamic between Chomp and the enemies (in which a water-type form will be effective against fire-based enemies, but weak against earth types, and so forth) and there's a satisfyingly complex system at work controlling Chomp's development.

Undermining all this, however, is that Chomp isn't quite important enough in the first place. Ellie's mixture of projectile and melee attacks is sufficiently strong that you'll more often find yourself waiting for Chomp to get some hits in (and therefore gain some XP) than depending on him in battle and, for the most part, his lower-screen home is sadly underutilised. You need to send him below to recover energy, and enemies will occasionally retreat there in order to escape Ellie's attacks, but the interplay between the screens that the setup could support – and which *Henry Hatsworth* offered – is largely absent. Sending Chomp to hit switches on the lower screen to remove impediments to Ellie's progress above is about as complicated as it gets.

The backtracking that can all too easily overwhelm a game built around the 2D *Metroid* structure is fully present here, with objectives ricocheting Ellie across the map like she's trapped in a pinball machine. That a few of Ellie's abilities are of little practical use – you'll only break them out to pass the barriers for which they've been specifically designed – compounds this feeling of artificial lengthening.

Take away Chomp, and *Monster Tale* is a pleasant, albeit unremarkable, platform game. With your monster ally by your side, it offers glimpses of something more intriguing, but its most interesting idea is the one that feels frustratingly underexplored. **[6]**



The earth-themed Chain Chomp attack catches enemies who have the misfortune to be standing between Chomp and Ellie in its green, damaging glow. Its effectiveness hinges on Chomp keeping his distance



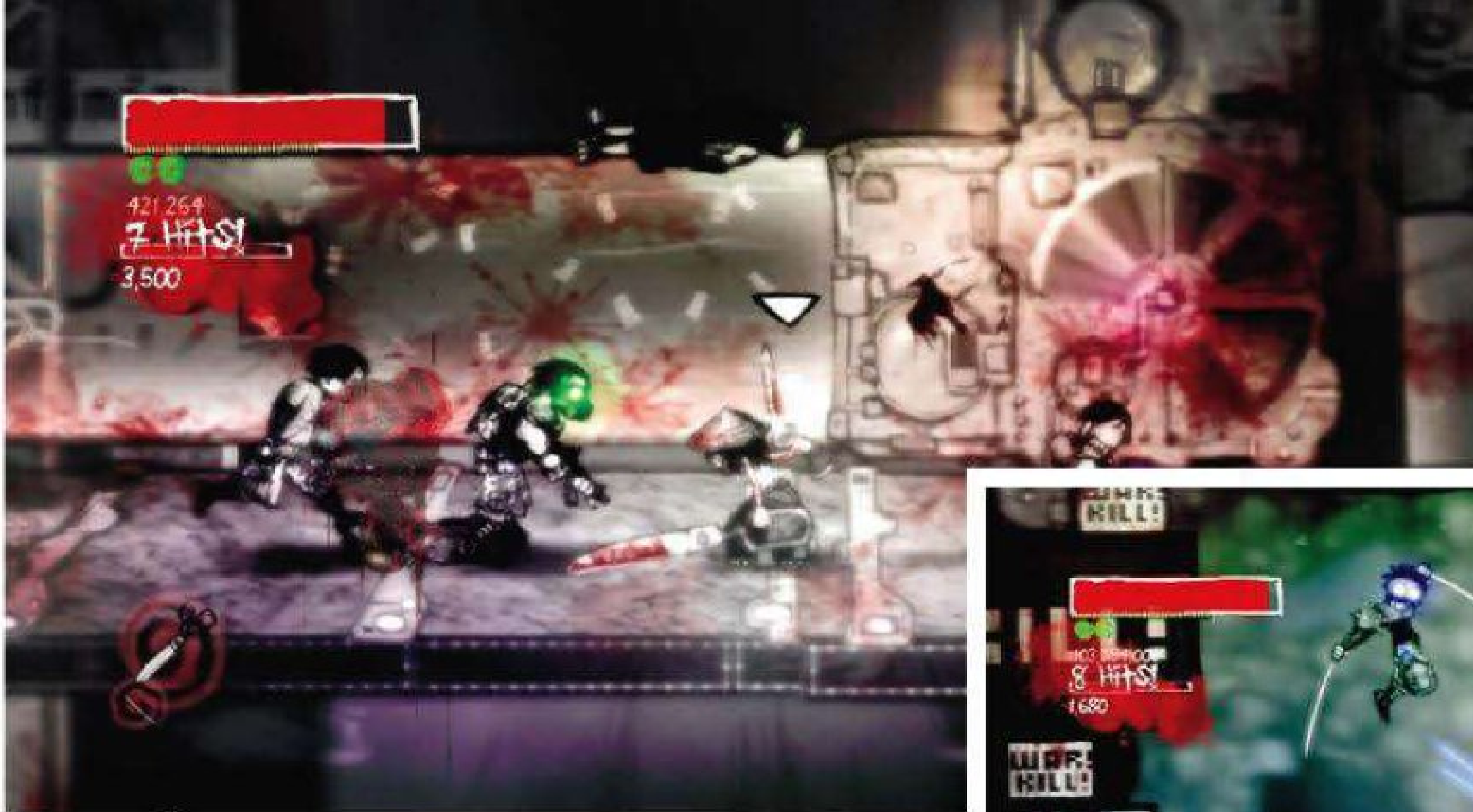
Monster Tale's story sees Ellie whisked to a fantasy world ruled over by a cruel pack of children who journeyed there before her. The map is divided into their distinctively themed, individual kingdoms

At predefined points, access opens up to new batches of forms. 'Adult' forms (such as the hulking brute above) are naturally heavier hitters than the fleet teenage forms

Pet treats



Defeated enemies that don't drop treats for Chomp will often relinquish coins, which can be exchanged with a merchant who appears at points throughout the map. You can use the merchant to exert some extra control over Chomp's development – spending all your money on one type of food, for instance, in order to bump up the relevant stats. A sub-screen charting Chomp's development offers clues as to the items needed to produce certain forms. The merchant also sells upgrades for Ellie, increasing her life bar, for example, or attack power.



Vampire Smile mitigates its persistently monochromatic demeanour by occasionally splashing neon accents across the screen. Note the glowing blue eyes on these cyborg assassins





THE DISHWASHER: VAMPIRE SMILE

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: SKA STUDIOS

Kung-fusion



In addition to the game's story mode, which can be played in either local or online co-op, *Vampire Smile* offers an arcade mode and another called Dish Challenge, which both involve fighting your way through enemy waves, introducing added wrinkles such as time limits. These modes are where the game's monochromatic look and chaotic combat become problematic. Because the action onscreen plays out in such a manic fashion, and the appearance of Yuki and The Dishwasher are just similar enough, it can be extremely difficult at times to keep track of the tiny white or pink arrow above your character's head.

Indie developer James Silva hit the jackpot when his 2D side-scrolling beat 'em up *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* won Microsoft's initial Dream-Build-Play development contest in 2007. Not a metaphorical jackpot, mind you; a $10,000 one. He also picked up an Xbox Live Arcade publishing contract for his efforts. The sequel to *Dead Samurai*, *Vampire Smile*, builds on the gothy charm of its predecessor, refining its hit-chaining combat and dialling up the scope of its artistic ambition.

Vampire Smile's story – presented in hand-sketched, comic-panel cutscenes – once again finds The Dishwasher caught up in a quest for revenge against members of a shadowy organisation called The Cyborg Assimilation Movement. Joining The Dishwasher this time out is his mentally deranged step-sister Yuki, who wields a chainsaw arm that efficiently manages to evoke both the Evil Dead films and *Gears Of War*. Unfortunately, Yuki offers precious little differentiation in terms of overall attack style, which leaves her addition feeling less tactical than cosmetic – the FemDish, as it were, of the Dishwasher universe.

The game's giddy remix of the samurai genre, codified in Japanese cinema by auteurs such as Akira Kurosawa, treats the source text in a fashion similar to Tarantino's Kill Bill, in that it manages to be at once irreverent and a work of deeply affectionate homage. Whereas Tarantino's samurai pastiche's roots drew nourishment from cinematic tropes, Silva's understandably emerge from the videogame annals. *Vampire Smile*'s 2D side-scrolling presentation and Swift Blade – a needle-thin katana – tip their conical hats to *Ninja Gaiden*; early levels contain enormous decorative comm terminals that recall the original NES interpretation of *Bionic Commando*. And occasionally Silva bins subtlety entirely, most notably in the case of the Cloud Sword, which is the exact same shape as *Final Fantasy VII*'s iconic, ten-ton blade.





Given the game's narrative context, it defies logic that nobody in Microsoft's marketing team thought to tease this series with 'Revenge is a dish best served clean'

When the screen inevitably clogs with enemies and the game's cock-rock metal soundtrack churns to life, combat takes on a manic, punctuation-stripped visual poetry. Chaining together heavy attacks, light attacks, grabs, 'dish magic' and gunfire without interstitial delay sends your score rocketing into Sillyville (our second-level total of 128,383,950, for example, felt like some kind of Twin Galaxies world record). When you perform a grab on an enemy with the B button and The Dishwasher delivers a devastating piledriver, the camera zooms in for an extreme close-up. If an unfortunate enemy happens to be jetpacking by in your proximity when you bounce back up after your initial piledriver, it's a joy to simply press B and have it all happen again.



Silva squeezes yet another retro reference into the map screen. The dotted path snaking up the fortress to skull markers is lifted right out of the NES *Mega Man* games

The game's monochromatic palette, though not as severe as its XBLA sibling *Limbo*, initially feels drab. Silva makes this design choice feel like a calculated one, however, creating astounding visual drama by layering neon accents. The vivid green mask on one foe echoes Sam Fisher's goggles. When enemies are a single hit from death they shower blue sparks, prompting you to hit X or B for a stylish finishing blow.

The larger dimensions of the exquisitely goofy bosses afford Silva's considerable artistic chops more room for nuance. However, as talented an artist as *Vampire Smile*'s creator may be, one man can only draw so many drawings, which means levels employ an almost numbing degree of asset recycling. *Vampire Smile* makes up for its occasionally spartan demeanour with verve and personality. Like the protagonist's pet crow which faithfully returns to settle on its owner's hat after being jostled free, players will find themselves returning to *Vampire Smile* with equal affection. **[7]**





Fragments of an alien spaceship land in Iraq and Japan, and are quickly shrouded in a vast shield-like anomaly. Both locations are painted in gorgeous, rich colours



If, like us, you're the kind of nerd who gets worked up by good interface design, *Anomaly*'s swiftly accessed tactical map and upgrade overlays may just leave you misting up your monitor or touchscreen

ANOMALY: WARZONE EARTH

FORMAT: IPAD, IPHONE, MAC, PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 11 BIT STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E223

Though the bland name may be destined to slip from your mind before you turn this page, 11 Bit Studios has concealed beneath it a masterclass in dual iPad and PC interface design. Modest in scope and cost, *Anomaly* offers an inversion of the tower defence genre which marries blissfully with either finger taps or mouse clicks. It's a low-maintenance RTS in which the majority of your units form a column of armour which moves implacably forward, its route through war-torn cities altered only by switching arrows at each intersection on a tactical map. You directly control only the commander – a unit which is unable to attack, but can dash around the map freely, picking up airdropped supplies and deploying area-of-effect powers to heal or conceal your column while distracting the alien turrets that line the ruined streets.



Working out a route which allows you to harvest the richest source of collectibles while limiting your vulnerability provides the central challenge. Since some enemy turrets can't turn, choosing a route which blindsides them is key, particularly as they will otherwise deliver a deadly frontal attack which sears along the street ahead evaporating all vehicles in its path. Of course, you could simply rely on having enough power-ups to weather the storm – repair powers are particularly handy here, though other enemies, like the slow-turning missile turrets, are best dealt with by decoys. The speedy but relatively weak turrets that make up the bulk of the aliens' defences, meanwhile, can easily be befuddled by deploying smoke.

The differences between enemy turrets are not quite stark enough to demand any greater tactical variety than this. You quickly arrive at a one-size-fits-all solution, and the harder difficulty levels don't really demand that you explore new tactical avenues, even as they force you to eke out resources and compensate for losses. There's an optimum order to your column's formation – a heavily armoured unit up front to sop up the damage, followed by a shield generator and a number of powerful but fragile rocket-firing walkers. Simply spamming skills as this column ploughs into battle will help you see off most challenges. It shifts the problem to ensuring you have an adequate supply of powers – which, given that you earn them as you kill, is a problem which the player solves with little intellectual engagement.

Though the early game keeps you busy as you learn the ropes, you quickly want for a more exaggerated rock-paper-scissors logic to force you to fiddle with the order of your units or direct your powers with greater specificity – seeking out and neutralising individual targets, rather than bombarding the middle ground with every area-of-effect skill you have.



The campaign throws a variety of mission objectives at you, from simply reaching an objective within a time limit, to picking up survivors en route or taking down specific targets. Hoover up weaker enemies if you can – destroying them brings in air drops

Despite such shortcomings, *Anomaly* has the trimmest and tidiest of cores – and, by dint of your stripped-back level of command, is able to deliver as swift and precise a means of interaction as any RTS has offered. It will be interesting to see how it develops, too, as we suspect the game's bestiary, armoury and range of available tactics will be further elaborated in later releases. Even if this remains a one-off for 11 Bit, with sumptuous visuals and such a brilliantly economic interface, we hope *Anomaly* doesn't prove to be an exception on iPad. **[7]**

Spend a penny



You can buy new units and upgrade them, too – but once you've reached your five-unit limit, no level in the main campaign is long enough for you to upgrade them to a meaningfully different degree of power. Upgrading is more useful in the skirmish mode, which sees you journey back and forth across a map, blasting waves of respawning turrets and their base units within a time-limit. There are leaderboards for these modes, although we're not entirely sure that *Anomaly* is the sort of game that incites the sort of acute competition seen among, say, players of *Trials HD*.



TIME EXTEND

ADVANCE WARS

FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2001**



The cheeriest war game in history offers no sense of shock, yet continues to inspire awe with its deftly tuned strategy elements

It's been ten years since Nintendo's *Advance Wars* series first appeared on western handhelds, and since then, the inexhaustible turn-based strategy franchise has undergone enough cosmetic surgery to rival *Castlevania*. The second Game Boy Advance instalment, *Black Hole Rising*, gave us secret labs and Neotanks, missile silos and pipelines. *Dual Strike* offered a very literal interpretation of the DS hardware, with air and ground fronts confusingly segregated between the two screens. *Dark Conflict* (aka *Days Of Ruin*) introduced useful new units such as the bike and the flare, as well as a much grimmer world. Multiplayer and light RPG elements evolved. All these variations helped keep the series fresh, but the first GBA outing still reigns supreme for its elegant balance and depth.

In *Advance Wars*, a candy shell masks a highly sophisticated chassis. On tile-based maps, you square off against rival forces, striving for annihilation or some other specified objective. But with a seamlessly interlocked array of variables at play, brute force won't get you very far. Units' strengths and weaknesses are daisychained together in rock-paper-scissors-like oppositions, which are further complicated by commanding officers' automatic buffs. Your army's attacking power declines with its health, so vying for the first strike is almost mandatory. Environmental factors like forests, mountains and mists affect visibility, defence and movement range, and your COs build up special powers that can turn the tide of battle in an instant. Weaving all these factors into devastating sorties or shrewd parries stands to this day as one of gaming's most satisfying operations.

Each mission also has arcane medals and rankings to achieve – good luck figuring out the difference between 'Jade Steed' and 'Opal Wolf' for each of the three COs, who all get unique map layouts, scenarios and objectives, justifying at least three playthroughs of the campaign mode. You often find yourself slowly building your force on the perimeter of the enemy's range, but the game continually serves up fresh, varied scenarios. Sometimes the cautious route is impossible, and you have to just kamikaze in. But you learn to persevere even when things look hopeless, because the maps are carefully designed to be winnable, with care, in the most dire of straits.

You learn to persevere even when things look hopeless, because the maps are designed to be winnable, with care, in the most dire of straits

Sometimes you're granted factories to spam units, and sometimes you have a limited force to work with. One map might charge you to protect a certain unit until it reaches a destination, while another requires you to capture a majority of cities before your enemy. Next, you have to capture the enemy's HQ, or simply survive until reinforcements show up. A lot of your total playtime goes into replays, as you slowly unfold the perfect strategy for a given map: which CO is best, how the AI responds to different stimuli, what's hidden in the obscuring fog of war, and which portions of the map are crucial to control early. If that wasn't enough, there are huge sets of graded tutorial missions and high-level war room challenges for you to conquer. The content is abundant as to seem virtually endless – and then you can make your own maps.

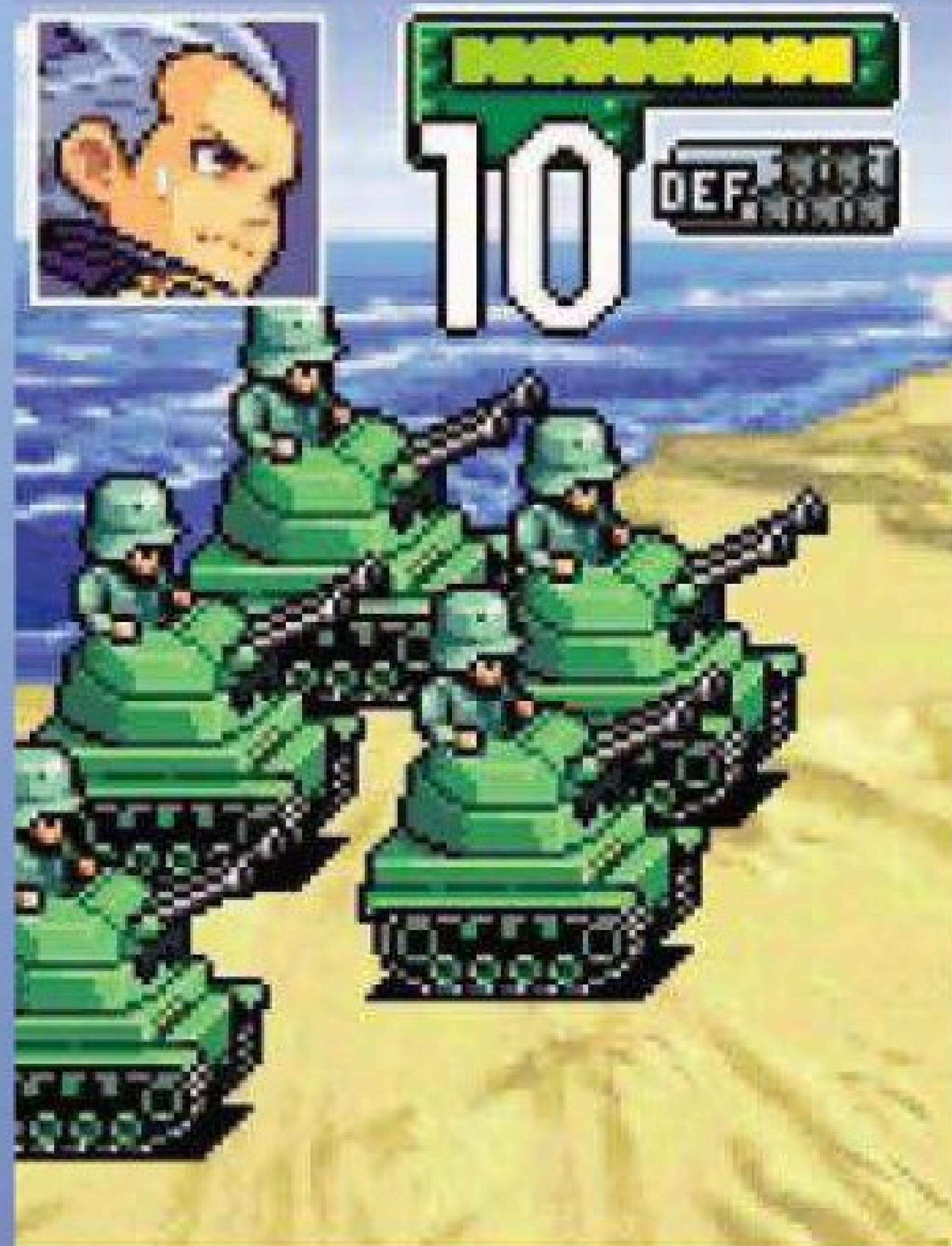
Japanese gamers have been playing the *Wars* series since 1988. As we reported in our Making Of feature (see **E**149), it was initially deemed too slow-paced for western gamers, and



LEARNING CURVE

The series is celebrated for its unforgiving but fair difficulty curve, which guides you painlessly from novice to expert. But replaying *Advance Wars* is a reminder that the series has gotten easier over time. By *Dark Conflict*, the CO powers were toned down, and the solution to each map was retrievable at any time. In *Advance Wars*, some COs have insanely over- or under-powered special moves: Green Earth CO Eagle can move and fire each unit twice in a single turn, while Sami can make her infantry units a little more mobile. And if you're stuck on a map, the only way to get the winning hint is to yield the battle and try again.







its eventual success in the west paved the way for the import of *Fire Emblem*. But with *Advance Wars*, the tables were turned. It happened to come out in the US just a day before the attacks of September 11, 2001, which caused it to be delayed in Europe and Japan. At that fraught time, the eternally chipper struggle between the nations of Orange Star, Blue Moon and Black Hole must have seemed like the most tacky sort of frivolity. But it's hard to imagine that *Advance Wars* could traumatise anyone, as it evokes the actual horrors of warfare only a little more strongly than chess. With the thinnest, most utilitarian veneer of storytelling between the player and the internal mathematics, the purity of the tactics and the tempo of the gameplay are barely mediated by the imagination. What story there is provides a crucial ambient charm.

***Advance Wars* suits** the GBA hardware nicely, though the screen's peculiar, dim depth still makes you feel like you're playing while losing blood from a head wound. The green grasses and blue rivers pop off the screen, and jellybean-coloured units bounce merrily at the knees like Steamboat Willie as they blithely await their anonymous dooms (this does not exclude the tanks and artillery units, which look as chunky and huggable as Tonka toys). The visuals are purely representational, like a tabletop-RPG grid. The soldier sprites are the same height as the buildings, which they jump up and down on to capture. For all the carnage and desperate rivalry, the mood is maniacally upbeat. The first mission is called 'It's War!' But the jiggling font and jaunty music – funk bass, hair-metal guitar squeals and J-pop synths – suggest something more along the lines of 'It's Pie!' The COs engage in pitched battles with each other, then catch up on old times as if sipping tea after dinner.

Because of the untranslated earlier games, *Advance Wars* seems to begin in the middle, with allusions to established character relationships that are meaningless to westerners. We're plunged neck-deep into the saga of Nell, a tutorial puppet who offers advice via 'transceiver', and Orange Star COs Andy, Max and Sami, who are at odds with the rival states of Blue Moon and, later, Black Hole. (Can you guess which nation is truly "the evil one"?) The player controls all three COs, one at a time, as a mysterious 'advisor' called Spite, whose role within the context of the narrative mystifies utterly. It's unclear why we couldn't have just played as







As affecting as the cartoon carnage that plays out whenever you make a move can be (left), switching the animations off speeds up the rhythm of a match



While later games would give you plenty of access to other nations' COs as part of their campaigns, it is only in the context-free War Room maps that *Advance Wars* really let you put Eagle, Kanbei and co through their paces

the COs, eliminating this shady middleman. Then again, metagame layering is par for the course here.

Unlike similar franchises such as *Fire Emblem*, *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Tactics Ogre*, in which your fighters have distinct backstories and vanish forever when they die, *Advance Wars* features easily replaceable and interchangeable troops. That's why it's more like chess than a war sim: the moral element is absent. When you have an infantry unit with one health point, no personality, no name and a nearby factory to crank out another, there's no reason not to use it as a human sacrifice, drawing the heavy tanks into the range of your rockets. The disjunction between the affirmative children's-story tone and lethal military battles is mind-boggling if you make yourself think about it – but thanks to the engrossing strategy, we seldom do. As endless fodder is ground to dust under tank treads, the COs seem as oblivious to the human toll as we are.

With the theatre of war stripped down to tactical abstraction, the joy and despair of battle plays out only via talking heads. The interactions between the tweenaged warlords are little more than capsules which deliver scenario info and hints, sketchily fleshed out with cajoling, teasing, flirting, and generally motivational banter. Whether or not the dialogue makes narrative sense seems to have been a secondary concern. "What's an airport again?" the battle-hardened mechanic Andy asks Sami, well into the game.

Described as a 'brash and energetic boy wonder', Andy wears orange shorts and looks about 12; anime-eyed and cow-licked. When his troops attack, he grins and flashes a peace sign. When they take fire, a bead of sweat appears on his temple. And when they die, vanishing in puffs of smoke, he blinks back tears for a moment, but quickly recovers. "I win!" he crows over the smouldering wreckage, tears and sacrifices all forgotten.

Advance Wars features easily replaceable and interchangeable troops. That's why it's more like chess than a war sim: the moral element is absent

All of the COs are like this; colourful bundles of stats loosely tied to instructive character types. The game characterises Japanese-styled commander Kanbei, for instance, as stupidly rash for the sake of broad comedy and sneaky tutelage. His daughter Sonja – dressed, for some reason, in western military garb – warns him that an isolated base on an island is tactically useless. Of course, he hears something like "BASE GOOD" and rushes in to capture it, getting handily routed by Andy as he does so. "By my sword! That was a useless base!" he cries after the mission, just to make sure you got the point.

We are coming to the point at which gaming is a great medium for storytelling. But *Advance Wars* reminds us that gaming is a great medium for gaming, an experience we can't get anywhere else. This is why *Dark Conflict* seems like a cautionary tale against trying to insert narrative complexity where it doesn't belong. That latest *Wars* game is still fun, but its murkily coloured post-apocalyptic setting; its murderous anarchists and insane tyrants; its endless 'gritty' dialogue and preachy morality don't feel like *Advance Wars*, and the light-hearted storylines that seemed so ridiculous are sorely missed in hindsight. It would be great to see Intelligent Systems keep thoughtfully expanding the core gameplay, but revert to a more classic-Nintendo style of joyful storytelling that stays out of the way.

In *Advance Wars*, it's not just the storyline that fades from awareness. As you get better and better at the series, the mechanics themselves seem to recede as well, and you fall into a deep intuitive flow. It's almost like learning to play a piece of music, with the same sense of satisfaction when it comes together in a symphonic manoeuvre. The screen is a complex rhythm machine, units bouncing in complex syncopation. The bells and chings and the pitter-patter of tiny expendable feet that accompany each input reinforce the feeling of playing an instrument, where muscle memory takes over. Think, move, press A, press the left shoulder button to switch units, repeat as necessary. Then a quick A-Up-A to end your turn, no longer reading the menu, the motion as automatic as touching a guitar chord. It's the kind of game that makes you concentrate so deeply you come out the other side of thinking, and into a hypnotic gameplay loop with design principles that, more than 20 years in, show precious little need for reconstruction.



UNIT KNOWLEDGE

While later entries saw a proliferation of units, there are plenty in *Advance Wars*, and getting to know their strengths and weaknesses is a top priority. Infantry have low attack power, but crucially can capture cities and factories. Mech units also capture, but have a short range and high attack power. Tanks are good all-rounders unless you run into an anti-tank gun, which, like rockets and missiles, can't move and strike in the same turn. If that wasn't enough, there are recon units, air and ground units for moving troops, an air force and a navy to get to grips with.





V4.0



JUNE 7

THE MAKING OF...
TUROK: DINOSAUR HUNTER

In 1997, an N64 firstperson shooter that wasn't GoldenEye turned heads – and rescued its publisher from bankruptcy

FORMAT: **NINTENDO 64** PUBLISHER: **ACCLAIM** DEVELOPER: **IGUANA ENTERTAINMENT** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1997**

"Can dinosaurs save Acclaim?" asked Business Week in March 1997. It was a fair question. The previous year, the videogame publisher based in Glen Cove, New York had begun to struggle. Its share price dipped 76 per cent and Wall Street was shouting "sell, sell, sell". Then came that year's E3 in Atlanta.

Hidden away in a corner of the exhibition space was a small Texan developer named Iguana Entertainment and its youthful project lead **David Dienstbier**. Firing up a copy of Nintendo 64 game demo *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* on a tiny TV, Dienstbier began blasting away at raptors.

No one had ever seen anything like *Turok*. It was a firstperson shooter set in a lushly vegetated outdoor world inhabited by dinosaurs, motion-captured 3D humans, and the odd wild boar. While *Doom* asked you to glide through hi-tech corridors blasting demons, *Turok* was mapped out across fog-shrouded mesas. The mist helped mask draw-distance issues but it also added an atmospheric feel, enhanced by brilliant audio design featuring monkey calls and jungle drums.

An hour into the demo, Dienstbier had a gaggle of onlookers. By the end of the day, he had a crowd. "I pulled out a nuke and levelled half a dozen palm trees and they were like, 'No waaaaay!'" he recalls with a hearty chuckle. "People had seen big guns onscreen before but they'd never seen those sorts of effects. They just went apeshit."

In that instant, *Turok* became a sensation, especially among the corporate suits at Acclaim. "It was a very surreal moment because everyone at the company suddenly went, '*Turok* equals money… Dave, my boy! Have a Cuban cigar'."

By the end of E3, Dienstbier had been slapped on the back so many times that he was in danger of bruising. When it was released on March 4 – dubbed 'Turok Tuesday' – the game went on to sell 1.5 million copies. Acclaim's stock price bounced and the mayor of Glen Cove temporarily renamed one of the town's streets 'Turok Boulevard'.

Through the rose-tinted specs of hindsight, every hit title looks like a sure thing, but the picture is less clear when you're submerged in development. Work on *Turok* began in 1996. Eager to bolster revenue from its lucrative licensed movie games, Acclaim had begun to diversify. Among its acquisitions was Valiant Comics, which published the long-running title Turok, the story of a Native American warrior lost in a land populated by dinosaurs, aliens and supernatural beings.

"I pulled out a nuke and levelled half a dozen palm trees. People had seen big guns before but they'd never seen those sorts of effects"

When Nintendo approached Acclaim and asked it to make an exclusive FPS to help launch the new N64 console, the publisher dusted off Turok. Making the game of the comic fell to Iguana Entertainment, a software house in Austin that had also been part of Acclaim's buying spree. The developer – which kept a glass tank of reptiles in its offices – had previously





VORCHSPRUNG DURCH DINOS

Along with vegetarians, pacifists and PlayStation owners, the one group that really didn't feel much love for *Turok* was the German authorities. "I guess they had rules about killing people," jokes Dienstbier. "They said, 'You can't have all these guys running around, getting shot and flopping around and screaming'." A bright spark at Iguana came up with the idea of turning *Turok*'s human enemies into robots. "We were told: 'Robots don't bleed blood, they bleed oil'. It was absurd but it was either that or be banned." Oddly enough, the game did brisk business in Germany when it was released there.

scored a slamdunk with the console versions of *NBA Jam*. Hopes for *Turok* were less high – which may be why Iguana's management farmed it out to an inexperienced team led by fresh-faced newbie Dienstbier.

An escapee from the ad industry ("Where I saw concerted proof that Satan did exist"), the burly designer had never project-led a game before. "When they called me into the office, I said: 'You do realise I don't know what the hell I'm doing? I just started in this business'." You're a smart kid, they told him, you'll figure it out. With few resources and even fewer staff, Dienstbier rolled up his sleeves and got stuck in.

Acclaim was a giant of the 16bit era. Its fortune had been made with the home console version of *Mortal Kombat* – a game which impressed with its digitised 2D sprites. As times changed, though, Acclaim had begun to struggle. 3D graphics demanded a completely different approach. **Remington Scott**, the company's soft-spoken interactive director, was one of the new breed of talent brought in to help the company make the leap to the next generation. The answer was motion capture.

"Acclaim spent about $10m on building a motion-capture studio strictly for entertainment, not medical or sports analysis," remembers Scott. "They cored out the centre of a building and created a two-and-a-half-storey-tall optical-motion-capture facility." Acclaim's vigorous adoption of the technology helped drive its ubiquity during the '90s, and games like *NFL Quarterback Club*, *Frank Thomas' Big Hurt Baseball* and *Turok* became early landmarks of motion capture. "Everything you see going on in videogames today [in terms of motion and performance capture], we were doing and defining back then – trying to figure out how to do it for the first time," Scott says.



working on cinematic CGI pioneers including Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within, The Lord Of The Rings and Beowulf.

Back in 1996, Iguana's team happily embraced the new technology. Motion capture offered an elegant solution to the production problems with which

> "I really wanted to record the actions of a dinosaur, but that was a little challenging. We ended up doing tests with large birds"

It was so successful that Hollywood came calling. Acclaim's mo-cap studio was used for some of the visual effects in Batman Forever and Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers. Meanwhile, Scott himself became a leading figure in performance capture,

they were saddled: limited resources ("We had about two or three animators when we started the mo-cap shoot," says Dienstbier), a lack of Nintendo devkits, and a punishing 17-month schedule. Thanks to Acclaim's studio, movement could be quickly mapped on to the textured models bringing blocky, low-res polygons to life with startling results.

While *Turok*'s character models weren't as photorealistic as the digitised sprites in, say, *Mortal Kombat*, their lifelike movements made them surprisingly convincing. On the team was stuntman Brad Martin – now a Hollywood pro with credits on Spider-Man 3, Die Hard 4.0 and Salt – who was launched gamely off air ramps and trampolines to simulate enemies being blown up by grenades and rocket launchers. "We strung him up on a harness and flung him around like he was in the mouth of a dinosaur," Scott remembers.

More tricky were the non-human enemies. "I really wanted to record the actions of a dinosaur, but seeing as they're extinct, that



Dienstbier came under pressure to turn the 3D character models into sprites. "Some thought N64 *Doom*'s creatures looked better than ours. Maybe in a screenshot, but when they moved it was a different story"





Most of *Turok*'s early concept art and design docs were lost in a flood, but artist Alan Johnson kindly found these rare relics of raptor sketches and untextured renders of the character models for this article

was a little challenging," he explains wryly. "We ended up doing some tests with large birds. The ostrich was too big and the trainer couldn't control it, but the emu was a better choice. We had problems adhering the markers to the animal and directing it, so we didn't end up with much usable data. But the reference material was valuable. I still come back to that on projects that come up to this day concerning dinosaurs."

In the end, it was only the human enemies who were mo-capped, but it set a new benchmark in terms of 3D character animation. "*Turok* became a poster child for the kind of motion capture that was possible in 3D gaming," explains Dienstbier. "We wanted to make the game an event. We were saying: you may think you know everything about what firstperson shooters are, but we want to show you what they *can* be. We really wanted to fire up people's imaginations."

Mention the words FPS and N64 to most gamers and you'll get one answer: *GoldenEye*. While Rare's seminal shooter thrived on the elegance of its multiplayer, *Turok* had to fly solo. As a singleplayer experience, it proved suitably atmospheric. The environments took most of the credit for that, providing players with a selection of lush jungles filled with wild boar and vicious raptors, juxtaposed with gloomy caverns and ruins. "Games like *Doom* were extraordinarily limited to confined, rectangular interior spaces," argues Dienstbier. "We wanted to do something that would open that up."

Not content with merely opening up the FPS, Iguana also wanted to max it out. In *Turok*, everything was bigger, bolder, badder. Neither Sir Arthur Conan Doyle nor Steven Spielberg ever imagined 'binosaurs' (bionic dinosaurs), but *Turok* did. The insane result was, among other delights, a T-Rex with a head-mounted laser cannon. Then there was the weaponry design, from the quad-rocket launcher to the lip-quivering power of the fabled Chronosceptor.

"It's tame by today's standards but at the time I think *Turok* had a grandeur about it," reflects Dienstbier, who'd go on to work on several of the sequels. "It felt bigger. It was more over-the-top in terms of what its weapons did and how the enemies reacted to being hit – our particle effects system was very, very advanced for home consoles. We wanted to make PC fans go: 'Holy crap! This is playing on a Nintendo machine that I just plugged in!'"

Considering the game's violent content, there were naturally concerns over how Nintendo would react. "We really knew we were pushing Nintendo's tolerance for violence in a game on their console," says Dienstbier. "But it turned out a lot of our fears were unfounded. They never wanted to see anything, approve anything." Instead, realising it had a potential hit for its new console, the house of Mario began throwing resources at the *Turok* team.

"We were having a real hard time getting devkits from Nintendo, and we only had two of those really expensive SGI machines," Dienstbier explains. "All of the artists and designers were sharing one, and our lead programmer [Rob Cohen] had one in his office so he could write the game engine and test it. After that E3 demo, development systems suddenly started turning up. It was great."

So, did the dinosaurs really save Acclaim? Yes and no. Although the game's sales, and the franchise it spawned, helped the publisher struggle along for a few more years, Acclaim filed for Chapter 7 in 2004. The company may be defunct, but *Turok* lives on with six sequels and a reputation as one of the most bonkers firstperson shooters of the '90s. It's a dinosaur of the FPS genre, but it needn't fear extinction.





IF IT BLEEDS...

As the title hints, *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* is a game that understands the thrill of the hunt. Stalking, shooting and slaughtering your way through its levels you discover that everything's fair game: deer, boar, even the fish in the rivers. To Dienstbier, *Turok*'s violence toward animals made perfect sense. "I grew up hunting rabbits, squirrels, pheasants, doves, quail, deer and elk," he says. "I only tended to hunt things that I considered to be delicious. I wasn't raised to be a trophy hunter. The best part of hunting isn't killing an animal; sometimes it's just being out there. My best hunt was one when I let a deer go. All of that heavily played into creating a convincing outdoor world."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The road less travelled

How Hollywood titles veteran VooDooDog survived MotorStorm's apocalypse

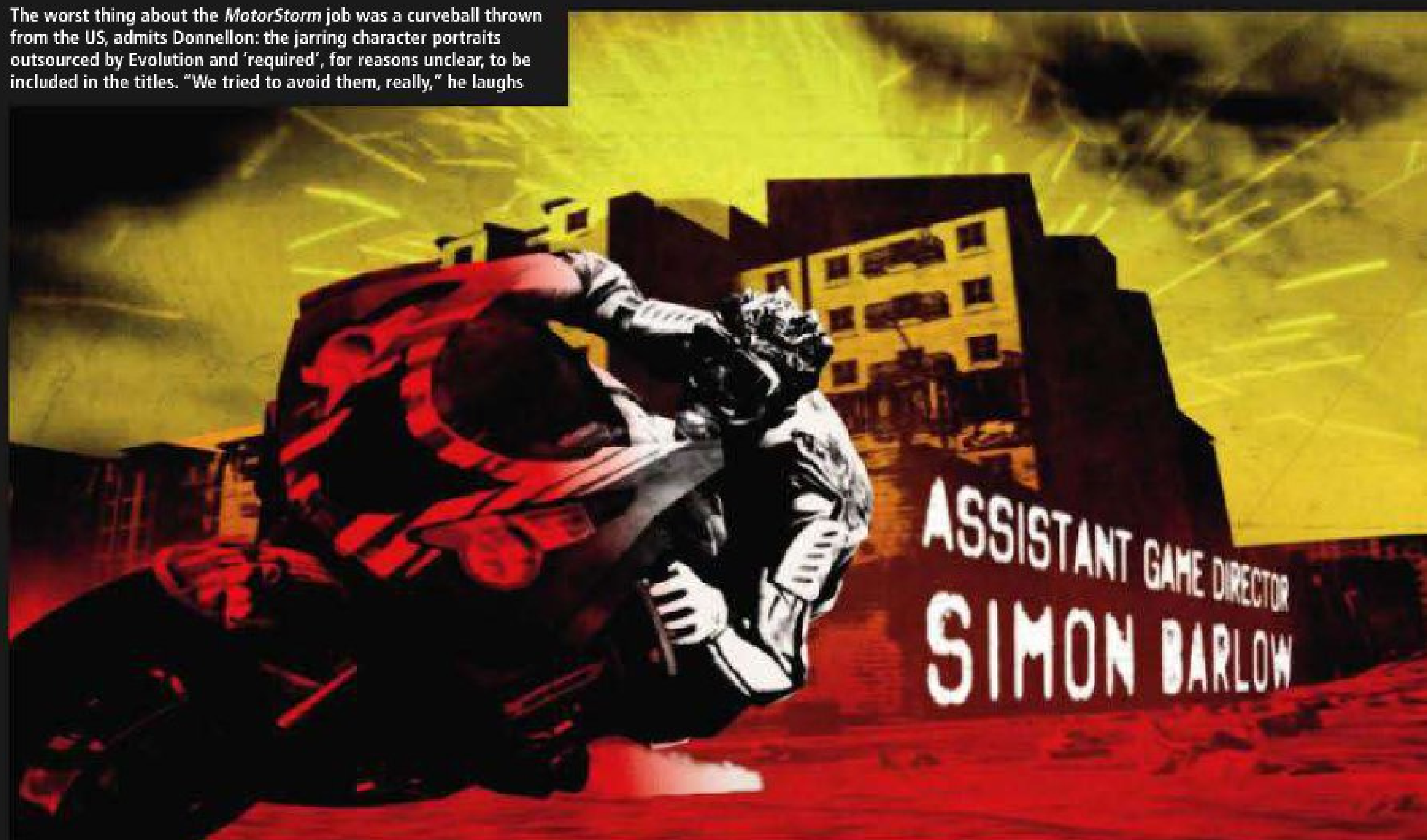

Paul Donnellon, creative director of titles specialist VooDooDog

To quote one of Alan Partridge's barrel-scraping career highlights: "Crash! Bang! What a video." For the *MotorStorm* to end them all – because where on Earth do you go after that performance? – Evolution Studios decided to begin with a bang, calling on London creative studio VooDooDog to create the game's opening titles. Known for stealing shows like Scott Pilgrim Vs The World with its fizzy idents, it was the outfit's work on Joe Carnahan's boisterous Smokin' Aces that earned it a phone call from Evolution's audio director Alan McDermott. "He'd been approaching Hollywood composers like Klaus Badelt [Pirates Of The Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black Pearl] to do the music, so they were thinking big and they wanted a cinema feel to the game," recalls creative director **Paul Donnellon**.

"Obviously when you do a title sequence for a movie you're either using live action shots or designing from scratch, so this is unusual because you're having to try and use the assets from the game, pose them and design them so they'll work. It meant we had to go down to Runcorn for a few days and sit and grab screenshots of the characters and things we could use to build backgrounds. They were really busy on the game so we

> **"The bits we thought would be difficult were straightforward, and the little bits became the big issues"**

The worst thing about the *MotorStorm* job was a curveball thrown from the US, admits Donnellon: the jarring character portraits outsourced by Evolution and 'required', for reasons unclear, to be included in the titles. "We tried to avoid them, really," he laughs



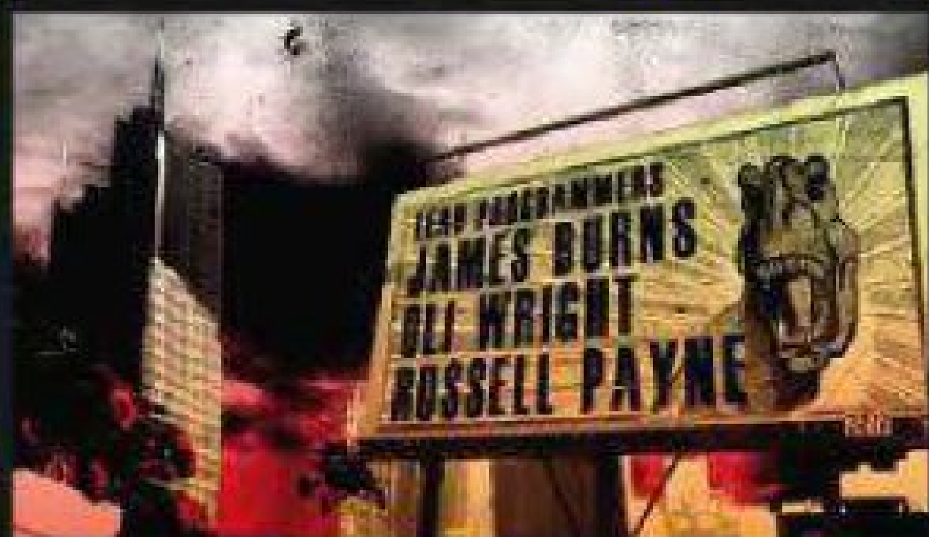


In addition to the opening titles, VooDooDog provided three ident sequences to introduce the game's characters, each a star of their own narrative-driven difficulty level

had to not interfere with their workflow, but then we needed to get a lot of stuff. We got some models as well, because we use Maya for our 3D work and they were using it for theirs. That was good; it meant we weren't having to go back to them to render this and that."

For a game-industry virgin, it was a process of surprising differences and similarities. "It was an odd way of working," says Donnellon. "The bits we thought would be difficult were quite straightforward, and the little bits became the big issues." The screenshots, for example, were an introduction to source material which, unlike movie footage, could run indefinitely from any angle and in just about any direction. Concerns were raised about realtime composition – the layering of elements and what could and couldn't be exported for VooDooDog's use. Meeting it halfway, Evolution introduced a virtual green screen behind the cars, "and saved us a lot of work, rather than us having to hand-paint them out, frame by frame."







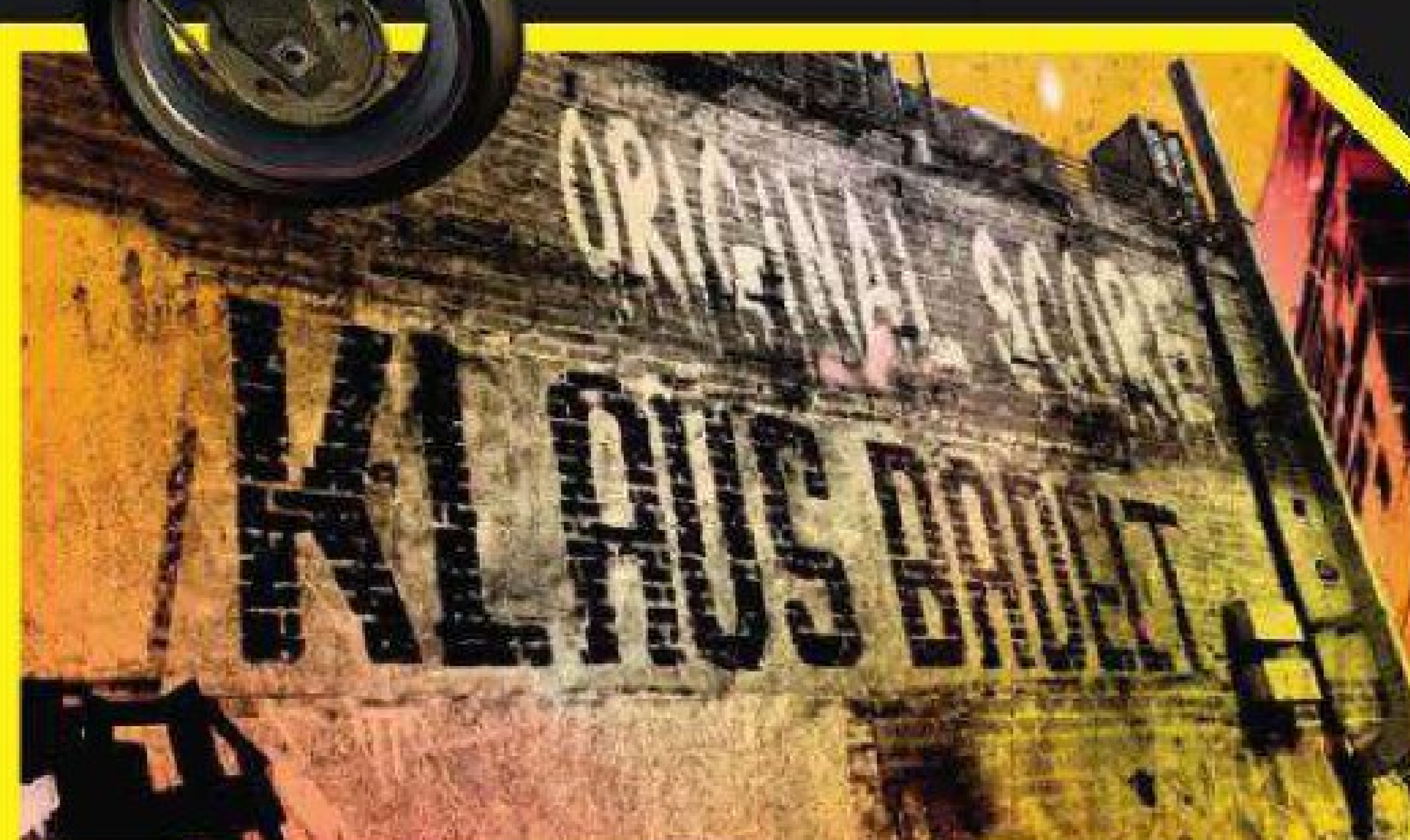
With a four-week deadline – its movie work tends towards eight – and a client knee-deep in crunch, VooDooDog had the added luxury of working squarely within its comfort zone. As much as Evolution wanted to be surprised, confirms Donnellon, it knew it wanted "that almost photocopied, Xerox look. I remember in The Wild Bunch they started to do that: it was a tiny sequence done with photocopies and handmade watercolour washes. And it worked with that softer heavy metal music."

Anyone familiar with the iconic work of Saul Bass – his titles for Alfred Hitchcock are rightly considered Hollywood greats – can imagine the importance of music to all of this. An early version of Klaus Bedelt's title track, mashed and scratched by the likes of DJ Shadow and Elite Force, formed the basis of Donnellon's very first storyboards, the sequence 'tightening up' as newer, closer to final versions became available. "Things tie in like camera moves and cars turning over. We used the score to tell us when to cut, and it was good having that energy there. We had the beat pattern and a lot of the guitar work; it was more like doing a music video."

Without knowing "half of what was in the game", Donnellon's sketches were as much a wishlist as anything, requiring backgrounds created in After Effects and Maya. And the improvisation didn't stop there. "Some is actually drawing it in Flash and using Painter. We did a lot of hand-painted textures to use as mattes. Even some of the animation on the figures: we animated them frame by frame and put them back in. So there was a lot of mixing. We had paper and were rubbing crayons on different textures, just to get stuff that didn't look flat like digital. It's nice doing that – it doesn't look like you're pushing a button.

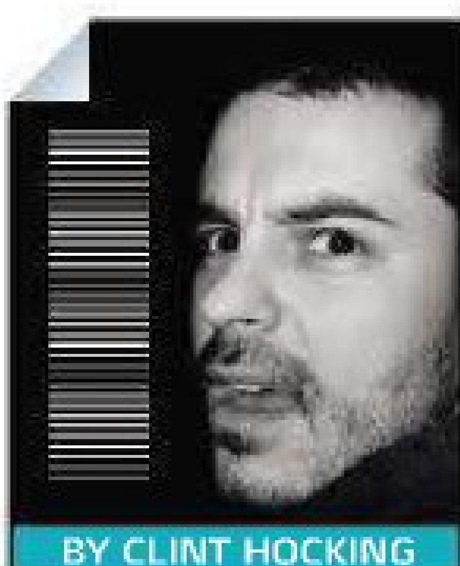
"Even the lens effects. In After Effects there's some lens modules for doing flickers and zooms, but we keyframed them ourselves to make them less robotic. It takes longer, but it's nicer because you're changing the parameters frame by frame. We tried it with generic focus-pulls and that music and it just fell kind of flat."

Such was the autonomy afforded to VooDooDog throughout the job that Donnellon confesses: "If we'd wanted to, we could have just hidden away and done it." It didn't, though, and both QuickTime clips and studio visits were exchanged. Feedback is as important, he says, as mapping every step of the project to avoid a point at which nothing can be changed. "And a lot of the time, what we've learned is that you bring up the negatives: 'We're not sure this works – what do you think?' Because it's better to burst the bubble. And that definitely worked for them because we could feed stuff through every week while we were doing it, rather than waiting for a big horrible shock at the end."



The words on the streets

It doesn't take an English degree to realise that type plays a rather important role in a title sequence. VooDooDog has earned special mention from the likes of the New York Times for this, snubbing the usual font bureaus for its own context-sensitive creations. "We wanted to try different handmade fonts," explains Donnellon. "We wanted to build it into the walls like graffiti, so we had no choice; it wasn't something we could just grab together. We do make an effort to make it interesting if we can, but so long as people can read it. Even on film titles we try to push it more because, to us, typography alone isn't enough."


BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING
The elephants in the room

Part four: Annual sequels

As a general rule, I prefer not to play sequels – even sequels to games I really like. The reason is that game sequels tend to be sequels in the narrative sense, but are rarely sequels in the mechanical or dynamical sense. Typically, a sequel continues the story of some rough-and-tumble anti-hero without making significant changes to the gameplay. If the gameplay changes enough, we typically call it a new game rather than a sequel. The evolution from *Guitar Hero* to *Rock Band*, for example, seems to me like what we should call a sequel. The gameplay, while riffing off of similar themes, and having a similar mood and similar aesthetics is a massive dynamical evolution – but it's not technically a sequel.

The main reason we make sequels the way we do is because they can typically be made cheaply – increasing the profitability of a franchise over time by leveraging the usually larger investment made in the original game into subsequent releases. This is a good reason. In addition, in most cases a sequel allows us to create new contexts in which the player is able to explore the original design and thereby appreciate it more deeply. This is also a good reason.

But these justifications must be weighed against a set of risks. If 'making a sequel more cheaply' means reducing the expense of designing, iterating and developing systems and refocusing our expenditure on things like story and character development, we risk creating an industry that is significantly more financially rewarding for the writers who churn out the sequels than for the designers who take the creative risks that establish the meaningful core of a franchise. This potentially incentivises growth toward an industry that favours static content over dynamic systems.

Similarly, when the purpose of a sequel is to provide new contexts for exploring the system design, we again risk incentivising a specific design approach. In this case we encourage system designs that rely on authored obstacles over richly interconnected play spaces full of emergent possibility. This can ultimately lead to game designs that are shallower, and more quickly and easily exhausted.

I think these risks are mostly kept in check by the day-to-day efforts of developers. In my experience, even when mildly incentivised away from doing so, most game developers are both smart and passionate, and will nevertheless tend to try to push at the boundaries of design and work to build rich and compelling systems.

> "There is no question that we need to better capitalise on our brands, but annualising sequels is probably not the most responsible way"

But I am concerned about what happens to this delicately balanced system when economic pressures push us closer to true annualisation of sequels. Launching sequels every 18 months to two years – while aggressive – can still leave room for designers to work on richly dynamic systems, while keeping the focus of development on interactive and dynamic elements rather than on iterative improvement of static assets such as art and story.

In a model driven by truly annualised sequels, I believe that the value of the good reasons for making those sequels is diminished significantly, and the risks of incentivising problematic approaches to game development are greatly magnified.

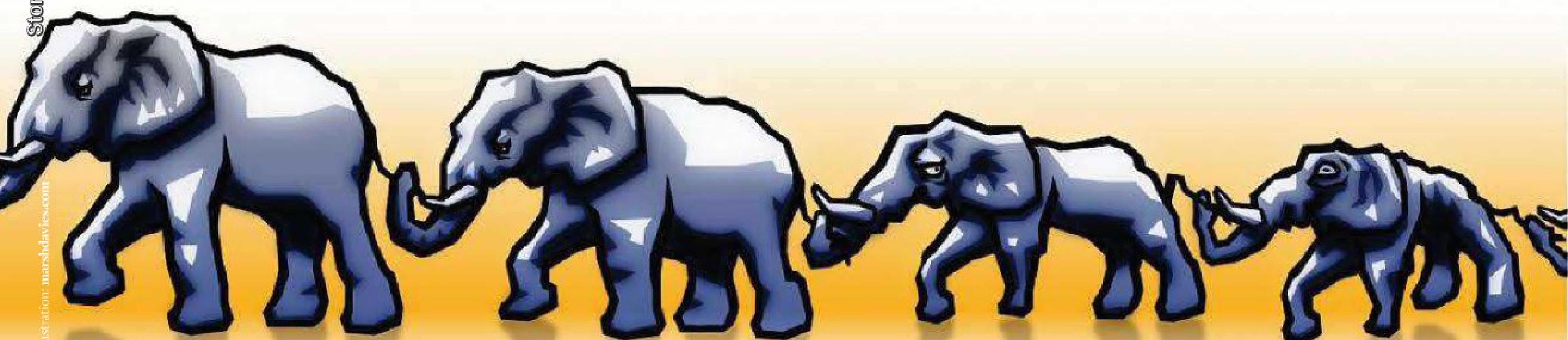
While it is clear that annualised sequels most definitely reduce the expense of development and amortise the cost of the original game optimally across its sequels, they also have the fastest audience burn-rate, and the highest risk for sudden failure. In other words, you may sell lots of copies of two or three sequels, but you will bore the audience very quickly and will have likely already spent all your money on the fourth sequel before realising the audience is tired of the game and won't buy it at all.

Similarly, to make a 12-month schedule you need to either risk burning out your team completely while at the same time forcing them to rely on predictable and proven content-driven approaches (leading to content-driven games), or you need to run two teams in staggered development. Staggered development might give two teams a more reasonable two-year development window, but it causes creative conflicts and leads to potential dissonance, divergence and lack of consistency in the products.

In the end, there is no question that in the current economic climate we need to better capitalise on our brands – but annualising sequels is probably not the most responsible path to doing so. It might generate easy revenue, but the long-term costs to the creative well-being of our workforce and the risk it places on our pipeline and workflow development, and on the skills we nurture and develop and will then need to leverage in making future games and (hopefully) new brands and franchises, should not be underestimated.

The decisions we make today shape not only the games we release next year, but the ways we will approach making games in the decades to come.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


Illustration: marshdavies.com

Tech's biggest names go head to head. Which side are you on?

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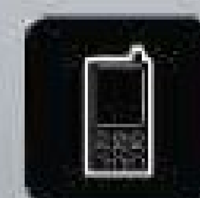
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HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Why all the violence?

I sometimes wonder how the number of virtual people killed by the average gamer compares to levels of historical violence. For example, do we off as many people in our gaming careers as have been murdered in real life, ever? How about just in the US since 1960? That would be about 880,000 murders, so if you play 50 violent games in your life, you'd only need to kill 17,600 people in each to reach that. Seems like some of us might be close. Has a real person ever killed even close to 17,600? Hopefully not, but what's clear is that murder is more prevalent in games than it is in real life.

If you try to raise your kids like a good hippie and give the boys dolls, they'll make them fight, just like the girls will put their toy trucks to bed. I'll dodge the gender stereotype implications and focus on the conclusion that violence is fundamentally at home in the human psyche, which makes sense given its utility in evolution and survival. When I was young I would hack down grass (orcs) with a stick (magic sword) and crush snow banks (delicate elf castles) with my boots (unstoppable feet of enormous giant). Media can serve a similar role by fuelling our imaginations for violence, satisfying our lust and curiosity and, like kittens play-fighting, helping us practice. The alarmists of history have lost their shit every time a new medium comes along and, inevitably, among its other contributions, deals with this human fascination with murder and destruction. Fortunately games, like the rest of them, have yet to transform entire populations of children into unfeeling butchers. Media theorists such as Henry Jenkins have leapt to our defence, making the clear-eyed and obvious counters to the attacks.

But, as game developers, does that give us carte blanche? It's totally fine for *Modern Warfare* to have a bit where you mow down terrified civilians in an airport? What about the fact that you can express no valid alternative in the interactive experience? No one who played that mission went out and enacted it in real life, but does that mean it's without consequence? What about 'opportunity cost', the idea that, sure, you can do something, but with the same amount of effort you could have done something else? Was that airport mission worth the opportunity cost? As artists, what is the point of putting violence in our works?

Rambo sprays bullets out of an Uzi, and all the Soviets fall to the ground clutching their torsos. Videogame characters disappear in a sanitised burst of sparks or a gore-porn explosion of gibs. This is cartoon violence, abstracted, impersonal, unconnected to reality. It's a far cry from hearing the story about your friend who got mugged, kicked, beaten up and hospitalised by a group of guys, unprovoked, while walking home last night. Or your cousin's stories from Iraq, of colleagues deformed by roadside bombs, of bashing down doors behind which are either armed combatants or a sleeping family. In real life, violence is traumatising and disempowering. It cracks the veneer of your safe and predictable world, stranding you in a tenuous one where you can be helplessly vulnerable, suddenly, without warning. Should artistic works be about the thrilling adventure, the horrifying reality, or both?

> "This is cartoon violence, unconnected to reality. It's a far cry from hearing the story about your friend who got mugged last night"

Combat, as a subject, is game design gold. Life-or-death stakes create high drama. It's clear when the encounter begins and how it is resolved, and it's easy to provide strong feedback about whether your intermediate actions have contributed toward success or failure. The nuances of your input are all meaningful: which decisions, their specific timing, and the series of continuous, fine, analogue adjustments you make. All of this creates depth and room for degrees of mastery. These qualities are common to the most exquisite action gameplay including racing, platforming and sports. It's why these types of experiences are so prevalent, and it's what people like Chris Hecker mean when they say some subjects are "with the grain" of our medium whereas others, like interpersonal relationships, are "against the grain". It's not that we love fighting and hate talking, it's that we have refined taste in interaction. But does this give us carte blanche either? Combat gameplay is an invention that someone came up with, featuring the mechanic of health points, which are abstract and unrealistic. It's very possible to invent new types of gameplay that work with the grain, as countless releases every year demonstrate, Hecker's *Spy Party* included.

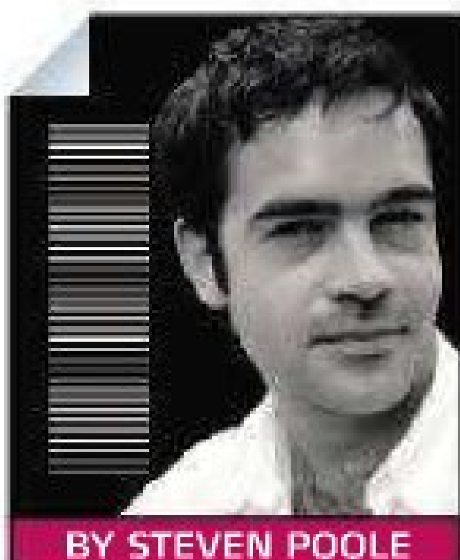
It's this tapestry of values and considerations that game authors are born into, and we each must decide for ourselves what to make of it. Hopefully this is at least a conscious decision. Tiger Style opts to make games without guns, but this is really born out of our ambition to investigate the frontiers of the medium, to push ourselves into new ideas. My distaste is not for the subject of violence per se, but for the unimaginative and played out. So often violence is used only because it's what works. I think we can do better.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



Illustration: marshdavies.com


FREE
WORLDWIDE
DELIVERY!



BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

All the fun of the fair

Sometimes, what comes after the colon in a game's title can be all too revealing. For example, I can exclusively reveal that the full title of *Killzone 3*, for some reason kept secret until now, is *Killzone 3: Helghast Go To The Funfair*. All that was missing, as I played through the campaign cooperatively with a friend, were the candy floss and toffee apples, the faint odour of vomit and the ambient threat of stabbing. Oh, wait: the game has an ambient threat of stabbing too.

The peripatetic entertainment collaborative called *Killzone 3* circles its shiny caravans outside your town and invites you aboard a sequence of rides. This is the bit where you mince around a junkyard in a mech-suit; this is the bit where you jump around in a jetpack; this is another on-rails bit in which the controller vibration from incessant minigunning threatens to shake all the pallid flesh off your face. Just like funfair rides, all these bits of the game are short; there is no logical reason apart from tradition (in this case, the tradition of modern blockbuster shooters) why they should all be in the same place at all; and some of them make you dizzy and sick.

Some funfair attractions are notoriously rigged: it's more or less impossible to throw the hoop over the bottle. Several times, *Killzone 3* perpetrates the same kind of cheat, as do all-too-many other games that are stitched together by FMV: you have to battle (shooting from the back of your flying car or whatnot) even though the game has predetermined that you will fail (cue cutscene of flying car or whatnot no longer flying but crashing, and heroes dutifully leaping off it at the last moment). This tends to make an insulting nonsense of your battling in the first place, just as you're a mug if you pay to play at the hoop-la stall.

Terrified that we might get bored if made to do the same thing for too long, and so shunting us incessantly from one ride to another, *Killzone 3* ends up failing in a different way: giving us precious little to get used to and good at. The dirty secret of videogame players is that we *like* doing the same thing over and over again: we want what Cliff Bleszinski called, in relation to *Gears Of War*, a "fun core-loop". That's what *Killzone 2* offered, in its grimly and grimily austere way. In *Killzone 3*, when my comrade and I actually got to do some tactical manoeuvring and firstperson shooting in interesting spaces, it was great – until the game, like some sort of fog-eyed funfair fascist, screamed that we had had enough and, all too soon, hauled us physically on to another ride, or worse, projected the next slab of interminable galactical nonsense-narrative at our tear-misted cheeks. (Note to game directors: there is no point in hiring actors such as Malcolm McDowell and Ray Winstone, and cleverly making some characters look like Stalin and Hitler, if the script is a long-windedly embarrassing farrago of threadbare cliché.)

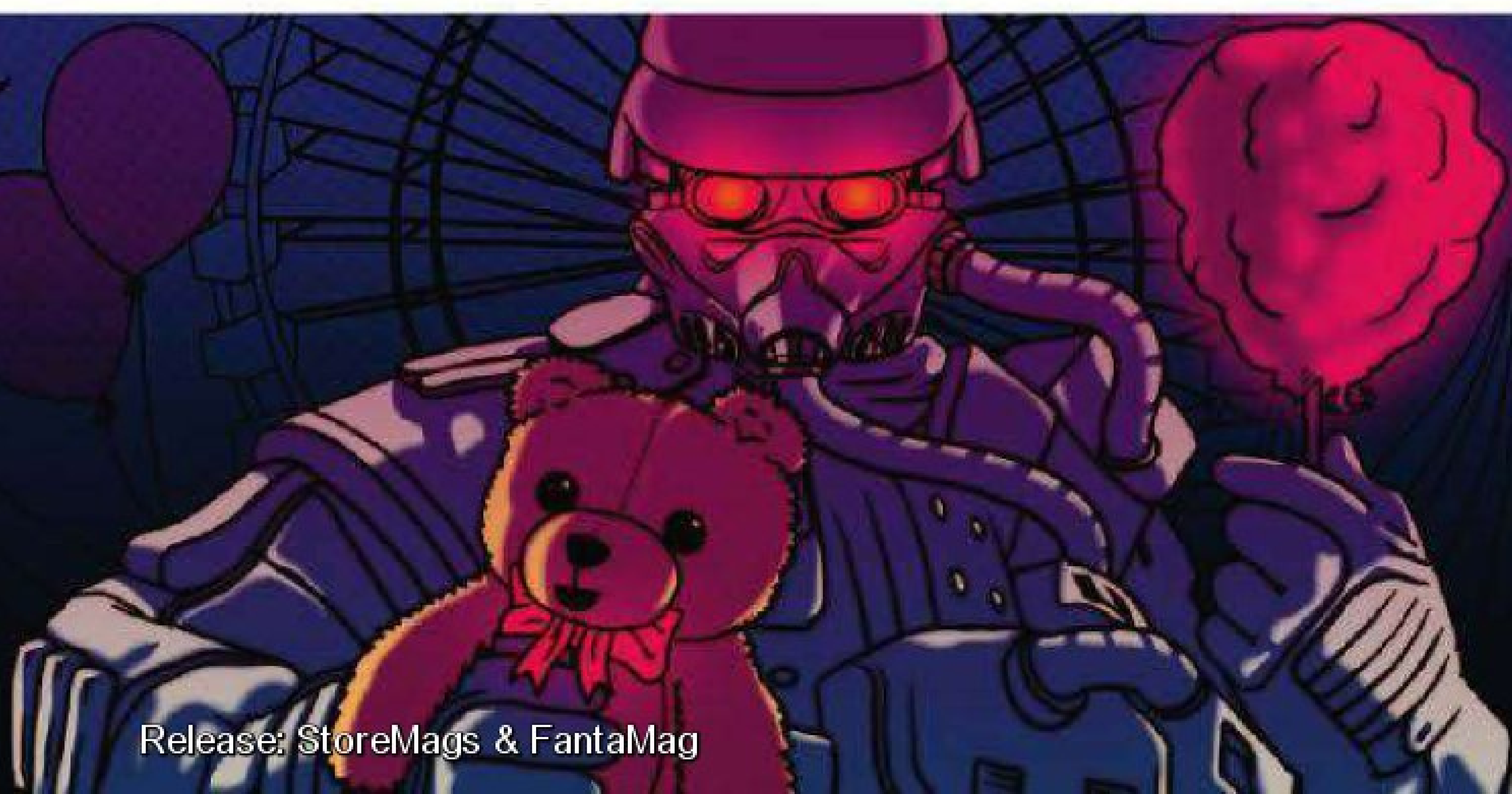
> "The dirty secret of videogame players is that we like doing the same thing over and over again: we want a "fun core-loop""

This kind of pre-emptive excess of fast-cutting variety, in which the good ideas are sorely under-exploited, and flash by just as quickly as the bad ones, is a curse of the modern big-budget game. Previously, my co-op colleague and I had played our way through *LittleBigPlanet 2* and been baffled by the way lovely ideas such as the Cake Gun or the rideable cats were more or less thrown away, never getting a level that really tested our only recently acquired skill with their mechanics. Perhaps such kitchen-sink mania is designed in order to appeal to gamers with some mild analogue of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; but in my expert medical view, readers, it seems rather more likely to induce it.

Far be it from me to insist that every firstperson shooter should consist of nothing but firstperson shooting, but temporary introduction of a different mechanic ought to be meaningful in context – as a brilliant example, consider the way the AC-130 gunship mission in *Call Of Duty 4* complicated the emotional affect of most gung-ho shooters, with its eerie visual distancing and the calm chatter of voices announcing dozens of deaths far below – and not just spannered in for the sake of change itself. All *Killzone* achieves with its brutal yearning to entertain, like some kind of evil puppy, is a fatal lack of focus: it's as though a promising television crime drama featured incomprehensible scenes of tap-dancing and song, dramatic reconstructions of historic sporting events, and pedagogical cookery.

It's ironic, at least in the Alanis Morrissette sense if no other: when I went to the funfair as a child, I was happiest if there was a sweaty Portakabin stuffed with arcade machines, and there I'd remain. Now I'm playing games that are supposedly for grown-ups, and they're too much like funfairs. I'm sorry, but the waltzer always made me want to hurl.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net





BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Whose game is it, anyway?

In the run up to the 2009 public beta for *Quake Live*, I met with the game's executive producer, Marty Stratton. One topic of discussion was the tremendous sense of ownership that longtime *Quake III Arena* players felt towards the game, and what a challenge it could be to deal with some of those fans when they were up in arms. For a variety of reasons, tweaks and changes were made to maps and weapons, but there was a contingent that simply wouldn't be satisfied unless *Quake Live* was exactly like *Quake III Arena* had been.

To hear him tell it, developing under that kind of scrutiny from a rabid fanbase could be somewhat intimidating, mostly for the younger members of the team, when confronted by one or more *Quake III Arena* vets. Which prompted me to remark, "I wonder what that's like, knowing that there are guys out there who may have literally played the original game every day, and as a result they may in fact know the game better than anyone who worked on *Quake III Arena* or who is working on *Quake Live*?"

The word 'fan', is, of course, short for 'fanatic.' And on some level, most developers and publishers want to elicit the devotion of the fanatic from their audience. Because for all the talk of technological platforms in the videogame industry, fans are the platform upon which blockbusters are built. Without their sustained engagement, even the biggest franchises and phenomena can vanish – just look at what happened to the plastic-instrument game over the past couple of years – which is why community management has become an increasingly essential part of the industry.

One of the unforeseen consequences of the community management apparatus is that the same tools that are used to bring creators closer to their fans – blogs, message boards, Facebook, Twitter – also have the effect of putting fans on the same level as creators within those forums. Once there, sheer numbers and the coalescent ability of the internet to bring together once far-flung people with common interests start to tilt the balance of power – or at least, the power of public opinion – away from the creator and towards their fanbase.

This was the subject of an April New Yorker story about fantasy novelist George RR Martin, whose A Song Of Fire And Ice series of books have been turned into an HBO TV series, with videogames in the works as well. The article examined the disparate responses of two groups of Martin aficionados to the six-year gap between the fourth and fifth novels in the series (the fifth book, A Dance With Dragons, is planned to be published this year). On one hand are the Brotherhood Without Banner, Martin's incredibly patient fans who empathise with his long slog towards publication and have remained loyal throughout. On the other hand are Martin's anti-fans, whose love for the series, owing to their impatience with what was a delay with no end in sight, has spread into sarcasm, haranguing, parody, ridicule and vitriol.

Hell, it seems, hath no fury like a fan scorned. As a one-time fan of the TV series Lost, I can myself relate. Having started to watch the show despite my sister's warning that based on the evidence of their prior work, JJ Abrams and his team would be unable to stick the landing, only to see it become increasingly far-fetched and risible in its latter years, to this day I still find it difficult to resist taking shots at the show when it's mentioned on the social networks I frequent.

> The more that fans invest of themselves in a particular work, the more they see themselves as investors or shareholders

This prompts the following passage in the New Yorker story: 'The online attacks on Martin suggest that some readers have a new idea about what an author owes them. They see themselves as customers, not devotees, and they expect prompt, consistent service. Martin, who is 62, told me that [his assistant] calls the disaffected readers the Entitlement Generation. "He thinks they're all younger people, teens and 20s. And that generation just wants what they want, and they want it now. If you don't give it to them, they're pissed off."'

It's a good observation, but it doesn't go far enough. Even though these attitudes seem indicative of a The Customer Is Always Right mentality, I'd argue that the more that fans invest of themselves in a particular work – an investment not merely of money, but also of time and emotion – the more they see themselves as investors, or shareholders in the ongoing development of the work. These fans don't think of themselves as the audience, but as patrons. And if they own the work, shouldn't they have a say in how it's made?

As individual games continue to evolve from standalone products to services; as they become more reliant on subscriptions, user-generated content, social interactions and the like, the more significant the risks and rewards of navigating the twin poles of fans and anti-fans. There's a school of thought that says that the designer and the player have always been co-authors of the game experience. In the 21st century, we may have to consider them co-owners as well.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



Illustration: marshdavies.com



inbox



Issue 227



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: All I want for next gen

1. New wavy controllers with special grips (like in the gym!) measuring sweaty palms, heart-rate and BMI.
2. 3D glasses-free!
3. Unified online allowing you to sync your downloaded games with your handheld.
hunk

4. A console that will last the entire generation without breaking.
Ali

I want backwards compatibility from all three next-gen consoles. Wireless recharging would also be nice.
SpaceGazelle

I want infra-red panels that absorb the heat of your hands and the room to charge the battery in your controller.
ScotsWahey

I'd also like Sony to invent a way to stop me from throwing a grenade every time I put the controller down.
Skintboymike

I can't be the only person who was surprised that the conclusion of your 'Why we kill' article [E227] – that we relish simulated violence because learning from it was a vital part of our prehistoric survival – failed to draw the obvious comparison to *Monster Hunter*, a series which so openly evokes the violent trials our ancestors must have faced. I certainly find *MH*'s tense, demanding battles more rewarding – and addictive – than a ten-kill-a-minute FPS shooting gallery, and while ancient hunters might not have fashioned ostentatious lances from the tusks of fallen mammoths, the social pride from a trophy kill will be familiar to anyone who's ventured online with a full set of high-end armour. It's significant that the game entirely forbids PVP combat, though: idealistically so, perhaps, given that you can actually heal teammates by shooting them. I wouldn't advocate the series taking steps towards enabling competitive griefing, but it could be interesting to see what might happen if it toyed with the possibility of some of that finely-honed martial violence being exerted socially, in the true spirit of caveman aggression.

I also couldn't help but think, while reading that article alongside your piece on Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker*, whether anyone would be brave enough to make the self-explanatory (and self-deprecating) *Headshot Clicker*, and whether it might prove that without the skillful application of positioning, aiming and timing that FPSes require, the reward of gory feedback becomes unsatisfying. I suspect that *Headshot Clicker* might end up resembling a compulsively grisly kind of bubble-wrap, though. Maybe we're all just gore junkies, after all.
Colin James

Headshot Clicker sounds like (and in fact is) the sort of thing a parody news site would come up with. Look at this issue's preview of *Rage* (p32) for an example of how gore and mutant body-horror can be combined with a thoughtful firstperson shooter.

I can't be the only person who was surprised that the conclusion of your 'Why we kill' article failed to draw the obvious comparison to Monster Hunter

It all seemed so simple. As a child gamer in the '70s and '80s, games were innocent fun, occasionally punctuated by a headline-grabbing 'videogame nasty' that turned out to be a terrible game with less titillation than the copy of the Sun newspaper that would do the rounds in the playground. As an emerging adult, with games becoming more realistic and violent, it was again a simple decision: should I buy the game or not?

Then, like many of your long-term subscribers, I became a parent. A proud parent of a son as obsessed with videogames as his dad. The joy I gained from watching him beat an endless slew of *Mario* and *Sonic* games exceeded that of me actually playing the games. As for violent games, it was simple: I would stick rigidly to the age ratings.

Now my son approaches high school and all of a sudden my world has turned upside-down. "Can we get *Black Ops*?"

"*Black Ops*? That is 18-rated, so absolutely not."



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

"But all my friends play it."

And it is true. I cannot believe how many seven- to ten-year-olds cite *Black Ops* as their favourite game. I am heartbroken. My son is being teased because I won't let him play 18-rated games. My son is genuinely upset, and that is such an awful feeling for a parent. He sees parents buying 18-rated games for kids half his age in game shops with the excuse to the cashier: "Yeah, but his mates have got it and he sees worse on TV."

I know, in my heart, that I should stick to my rule on ratings. I know those kids whose parents get them anything are likely to become very difficult teenagers. But I know my happy son is now unhappy because of the very hobby I introduced him to.

For the first time as a parent and fanatical videogamer, I simply do not know what to do.
Robin Edwards

The 18 rating is there for a reason, and we're way beyond the point at which gaming should've shed its 'for kids' image. Hopefully a DSi XL will serve as a distraction from *Black Ops* angst.

I was a clumsy kid, and at the age of six I was banged up in hospital with a leg in plaster. Mishearing the

medical assessment of my fractured limb, I thought that my leg would be encased for "68 weeks", news that flung me into a pit of despair. A year and a quarter stuck in hospital! Fortunately I had the attention span of a dazed herring. A nurse pressed the boomerang controller of the mighty Mega Drive II into my mitts, and before I could beat level two of *Mickey Mouse: World Of Illusion* the six-to-eight weeks of my recuperation had passed by, unnoticed.

There's a nasty corollary to the gripe that 'games are childish', which is that making things for children isn't a worthwhile endeavour, or that things intended for children can't achieve the status of high art or worthwhile culture.

Patent rubbish, of course – Raymond Briggs' The Snowman, Pixar's Wall-E and Game Freak's Pokémon have the capacity to astound, involve and surprise young and old alike. Yet, as games strive for acceptance as an art form, it is easy for their champions to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. When we insist that videogames are relevant to adults, we can't forget their incredible capacity to involve and transport children.

This was brought home to me recently. Last year I was lucky enough to win a handheld gaming machine for a letter to a popular videogaming periodical (something I said about owls...). I hurriedly purchased a swag bag of platformers and RPGs. But somehow, the emotional timbre of the stories in *Dragon Quest* and *Infinite Space* left me cold. Navigating beautiful worlds as a portly plumber didn't have the same shine as it once did in *Super Mario Land 2*. What was wrong with this machine?

Nothing was wrong with the DS, of course. But I'd grown up. And for all its technical ingenuity, the DS is a console dominated (if not defined) by games for young people, with complexity levels and narratives to match.

So, rather than let it gather dust on a shelf, it was time to find the DS a new home. A friend's young daughter will be undergoing surgery later this year, and I have no idea if there will be anything to distract her during her dull, uncomfortable stay in hospital. As such, she'll make a perfect carer for the orphan DS, and someone who will hopefully find far more joy in it than I ever could. Which says far more about me, and adults in general, than it does about the DS.

That's the end of my message. As a post-script, the charity Child's Play raises money to buy games and consoles for the children's wards of hospitals. Their list of partner hospitals now includes two in the UK – the Royal Manchester Children's Hospital and the Alder Hey Children's Hospital.
Timothy Franklin

When we insist that videogames are relevant to adults, we can't forget their incredible capacity to involve and transport children

We're not sure this was a standard caveman experience, but Colin James has a point about how the *Monster Hunter* series presses buttons



Regular readers of **Edge**'s internet discussion forum will be familiar with the Child's Play charity: for the past two years its members have raised money to buy games for kids stuck in hospital. It gets our full support.

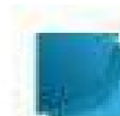


Topic: The next gen
3DS is out, PSP2 by Christmas. The handhelds are moving on.
The development of the new home consoles is already well under way. What do we want. What will we get? Mid-2012 launch? Announcements at E3 this year?
What angle will they go for, waggle? 3D? More of the same but more grunt?
Owwmykneecap

The 3DS will cause another delay to the next gen, everyone will want to see what impact 3D has on games before taking a risk on less than ideal glasses for the home consoles. I'm guessing 3D will quietly shuffle off again.
I think that the MS hardware approach will be copied – cheap, PC in a box, proprietary HDD. Discless seems crazy, but I can just about see Nintendo or MS going for it as an option.
God knows what controller they'll have, it's too early even to judge Kinect and I wonder how much the lack of a standard controller hampered traditional games on the Wii. Some sort of motion/traditional hybrid?
Nintendo to go first.
Aye Are

I can't see this gen being dumped any time soon. And by any time soon I mean within the next five years. It's simply been too much of a success so far to just jump ship and board the next gen. The only surefire thing is the migration (in Xbox users' cases) of Live to the next gen. Technically, all MS have to do is build a machine with better graphics and tag Live back on to it.
Speedhaak

Kinect crossed with actually good 3D stuff could work, bringing some kind of pseudo-VR to the proceedings its surely the next step?
With a gun and Lightsaber peripheral, obviously.
Hulka T



I have to take umbrage with Steven Poole's column in **E**225. The whole column is predicated on the idea that handheld consoles are losing ground to smartphones, but his evidence for this is that, across the whole mobile gaming market, the proportion of people playing games on their phone rose 50 per cent, and those playing on DS or PSP fell 13 per cent.

Well, pardon me for getting all mathsy, but say the DS has 150 million users, the PSP has 70 million users and the number of people playing on smartphones is 55 million. The smartphone gaming market is expanding extremely quickly – coverage of games like *Angry Birds* and *Cut The Rope* really began to enter the mainstream last year, and so people who had smartphones that they originally bought to use for work and socialising are more likely to download and play them. Therefore, if the number of smartphone gamers rose by around 40 million over that period, then you would see exactly the percentages at the top of this letter without the number of DS and PSP users having dropped at all. In fact, maybe the number of handheld users rose, but if the number of smartphone gamers rose faster (which it will in a rapidly expanding market), then you will still see the numbers Steven is using as proof that handheld gaming is dying.

I own an iPhone and a DS and I certainly do not see my iPhone as a replacement for my DS. I use my iPhone for very short bursts of gaming, while the DS is perfect for RPGs and certain kinds of puzzle games. Handheld gaming has been around for a long time now and a lot of the people to whom it appeals know who they are by now. On the contrary, smartphone gaming is a very different kind of gaming in my

Continued

opinion, and certainly there is a whole new share of the market to be uncovered. Who knows, maybe those discovering gaming for the first time on their smartphones will 'upgrade' to a dedicated gaming machine in the next couple of years.

In short, Steven may well be right, but the numbers he uses simply don't support the premise.

Chris Hemmens

When Axis Animation unleashed its arresting trailer for *Dead Island* earlier this year, the storm (in a teacup) that followed was perhaps predictable. Parent and MCV editor Ben Parfitt's distaste, relayed on the site, at the trailer's inclusion of the death of a child was understandable. Perhaps the many less-reasoned voices which jumped on the bandwagon were, too. But I felt distinctly disappointed that this one aspect of Axis's astonishing work was being singled out – apparently for fear that it risked the casting of yet more mud at videogames' name.

In conclusion, Parfitt writes: "From time to time we need to ask questions of what we choose to glorify and what elements of our industry we choose to defend and to celebrate. Gaming all too often comes under unfair attack and I've always been comfortable to lead in its vocal defence. But let's make sure we pick our fights carefully."

If the contention had been over the killing of a child during gameplay, his point would have carried more weight, but this was a piece of compact cinema, referencing countless precedents. Few games have ventured close to that particular precipice; despite its name, even Irrational Games remained well back from the edge in *BioShock*.

Topic: So what went right?

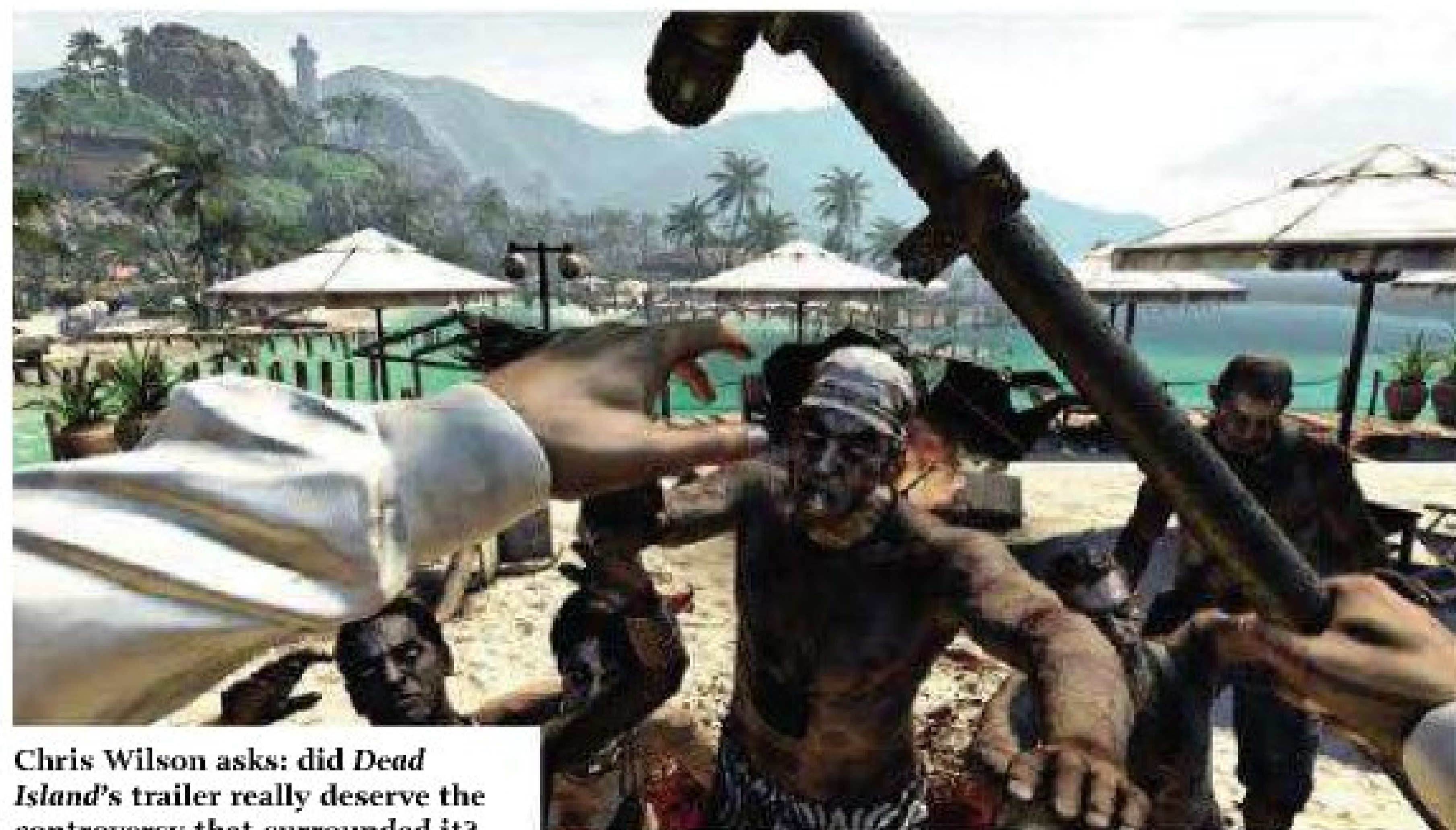
I know we like to complain, but what do you feel this gen got right?
SpaceGazelle

The 360 controller. Sony's and Microsoft's online focus. Valve did everything right.
-sigge-

The download market opening up, simultaneously making room for smaller and lower-budget games is not something to be dismissed either. Added to that the opportunities to play old classics you may have missed or crave to play on modern consoles.
AhMunnaEetChoo

Xbox Live – *Trials HD*, *Braid*, the Mega Man comeback, *Super Meat Boy*. The fact that we can now play quality games that cost about £10. Never designed for a £40 retail price point and all the better for it.
monkeyGod

For me it's a little less tangible. A general solidity to environments and characters that makes them feel more weighty. Less clipping through walls and that sort of thing. Also moving towards standardisation of controls and options between games so you don't feel as if you have to learn from scratch every time (although games can tend to feel a little too similar). Finally, I think certain genres have reached a 'complete' stage where the refinement of mechanics and technology have massively narrowed the gap between the idea and its realisation (to the point where a more dramatic shift will be required to advance further).
JB



Chris Wilson asks: did *Dead Island*'s trailer really deserve the controversy that surrounded it?

I've just watched episode one of The Walking Dead, and within minutes of its opening, a zombie girl is shot through the head. The general response to this in the press has been to applaud its bravery and interpret it as a signal of intent from the director – not worry about whether the world will think ill of TV drama as a result.

Neither example glorifies anything, of course, but if the game industry continues to dwell nervously in the shadow of other media, it is unlikely to mature any time soon.

Chris Wilson

There's been some recent chat about a 'one-console future'. A console that can play every game the way it was meant to be played, a console that developers specifically cater to. This console would have a standard format for playing games (like Sony's UMD but more universal). Nintendo, Sony, Microsoft and whoever else cares to join in would all settle on the specifications and produce their own versions of it. All third- and firstparty developers would now work on maximising the power of this singular console; there would be no more cases like *Bayonetta* (where the PS3 version got slightly skewed). There would be no more exclusives or exclusive content. Everyone could enjoy everything, and all fanboyism flame wars would be extinguished.

Xbox Live, PSN and WiiConnect24 would all merge together and become a service rivalling the very internet itself. All Achievements and Trophies would combine perfectly with one another under the new name of Badges. Friends lists, buddy lists and friend codes would sync up, allowing a seamless transition to this singular console. Kinect, Move, Wii MotionPlus and all other existing controllers would be combined into a standard controller, which would be a cross between a TV remote and your own body.

It would be backwards compatible with every game that came before it. Well, the first ones would be, but this would then become too expensive to manufacture and be dropped in the later models. It would have a 20-year lifecycle and a simultaneous global release in every country. All games would be region-free and released in all regions translated across all languages and cost exactly the same amount no matter where you bought it.

It would be released under the name 'When Pigs Fly'.

Thinking that a one-console future is ever going to happen is naïve. Thankfully, though, a similar item already exists and it is called the PC.

Steve Greeb

You're not suggesting the PC gaming world is anything like satisfactorily unified, are you? Because Games For Windows Live users just called...

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